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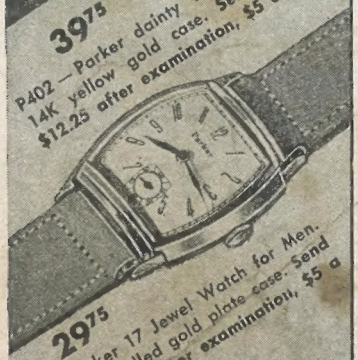

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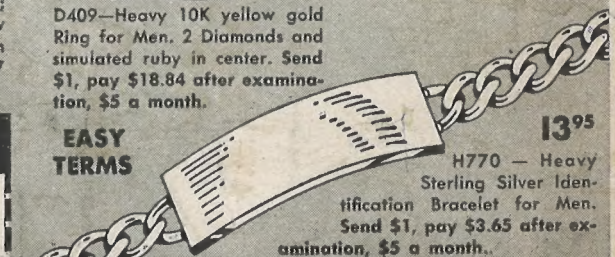

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★ IN THE SADDLE ★

OCCASIONALLY in the past we have run letters from readers touching on the present state of the old cattle trails, and of the Chisholm Trail in particular. In this issue, we continue the discussion, and are happy to print the two following letters—the first from John A. Saxon, Western fiction writer and *aficionado* of the Old West:

Editor, *Dime Western:*

I'm heartily in accord with George A. Prescott's suggestion as to clearing the mystery of the old trails. Unhappily, this would be difficult of accomplishment. History was *made* in those days—not *recorded.* You can get as many different stories concerning the old trails as there were men who rode them. This, to some, may seem strange. It really isn't. The word "trail" indicated something nebulous and indistinct. It was a word rather than a condition. The Chisholm trail itself at different periods varied in width from two hundred and fifty feet to as much as ten miles. It depended upon the condition of the weather, the condition of graze, and the personal ideas of the men who drove the herds.

You can still find old-timers along its route who will insist that it was "here" or that it was "there" and there may be miles between the indicated locations. Yet, they were right—*at the time they spoke of.*

This much we do know: that there are places where traces remain, but that doesn't mean that the trail, in the common usage of the word, was where the marks are found today.

I have read the memoirs of dozens of old-timers, and none of them agree.

We know that at certain periods there were definite mercantile stores and watering places along the general line of the trail: Doan's Store and Red River Crossing; Two Tanks in what is now Oklahoma, to mention a few. But there were dozens of other crossings besides Doan's. There were dozens of other watering places and supply stations. You'll find the same names on different maps *in different places.* It all depends upon the *period* in which these rough maps—and they were very rough—were made. As far as I know the most authentic survey is the one made by the State of Oklahoma. Yet I have heard *that* one questioned again and again by men who had been: "Ridin' that there trail when them surveyors was wearin' three-cornered pants."

(Please turn to page 8)

Accounting faces an unusual situation during the postwar period. The need and demand for accountants—both beginners and experts—is large while the supply is short. That spells opportunity for many—perhaps for you.

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(Continued from page 6)

It is true, as Mr. Prescott suggests, that Highway 277 does, in the main, follow the general line of what we know as the Chisholm Trail. However, if he, or any other interested person, will take the time to compare the present location of 277 with some of the old maps of The Oklahoma Historical Society, The Texas Historical Society, and maps made by individuals, many of them drawn from memory, it will be found that there is as wide a difference of opinion concerning "where it was" as was manifested in the late election.

To tell you the truth, I don't believe *anybody* can answer the question as to the exact location of the trail, unless it is *tied down to a date.*

I haven't been down there for several years, but I am glad to learn that *somebody* has taken the trouble to put up a road marker indicating that the Chisholm Trail was an actuality, and that physical proof thereof may still be found.

It is too bad, for the sake of posterity, that there hasn't been enough interest in the old days for some organization to preserve just a little of such places as Doan's Crossing of the Red.

When I was last in Langtry, of which Prescott speaks, the Texas Highway Commission had built a wire fence around "The Old Jedge's" combined bar and court room. Otherwise, I fear there would be little left of it, because of the activities of souvenir hunters.

Judge Roy Bean's one and only law book, a copy of "Blackstone's Commentaries," is still in existence. Also his sixgun. I believe at the present time they are in the custody of some of his descendants in Fort Worth or Dallas.

And here's Charles A. Martin, FC 3/c, who gives his address as the U.S. Naval Hospital, Seattle, Washington, who defines the route of the Chisholm Trail across his home state. Let 'er roll, Charley, and good luck to you!

Editor, *Dime Western:*

In a recent issue, I seem to have hit what appears to be the tail-end of a controversy that is of great interest to me, and I would like to put in my two cents' worth.

I don't know where Mr. Jack McCaffey is from, but apparently he didn't investigate the Old Jesse Chisholm Trail very closely. [McCaffey said that there was no trace left of the Old Chisholm Trail.—Ed.] If Mr. Prescott had traveled any on Highway No. 81, from about Waurikam to El Reno, Oklahoma, he would have found a hundred or more of those road signs, which he mentioned in his letter. Just two and a half miles from Dunkan, Oklahoma, (my home town), there is a huge stone monument marking the spot where the Old Trail crosses State Highway Number 7. I believe that is the number, though it has been changed four or five times in recent years.

Here is almost the exact route the Trail took across Oklahoma:

It crosses Red River at the mouth of Mud Creek and follows that stream almost to its head, then swings west to cross at the head of Cow Creek. It continues in a northwesterly direction until it hits Beaver Creek, a few miles west of Marlow, Oklahoma, where it turns north along this stream to its head, just west of Rush Springs.

It continues almost due north along a small tributary of the Little Washata River, which it crosses, then swings northwest again, where it transverses Highway No. 277, and where Mr. Prescott saw the marker. The Trail turns north then and crosses the main Washata River between Anadarko and Chickasha, continuing generally north until it crosses the South Canadian River around Geary, Oklahoma. It crosses the North Canadian at about Watanga and turns northwest again between that river and the Cimarron, leaving Oklahoma north of Buffalo, where it continues on to Dodge City, Kansas.

The highway signs are not the only ones that mark the course of the great Trail, for numerous parts of gear, such as broken down or burned chuckwagon parts, along with a generous sprinkling of arrow heads at remote spots, will continue to keep the Trail fairly clear for many years.

Thank you, gents, for some interesting observations and for the information. If any others of *Dime Western's* family would like to add, augment, or generally do some sharpshooting on this topic of the old trails, here's the place to forward what you have to say.

Meanwhile, just to keep the record clear, we'll be on deck as usual next month, and packed between the covers will be what we believe are some of the most colorful characters and the strongest Western drama we've yet published.

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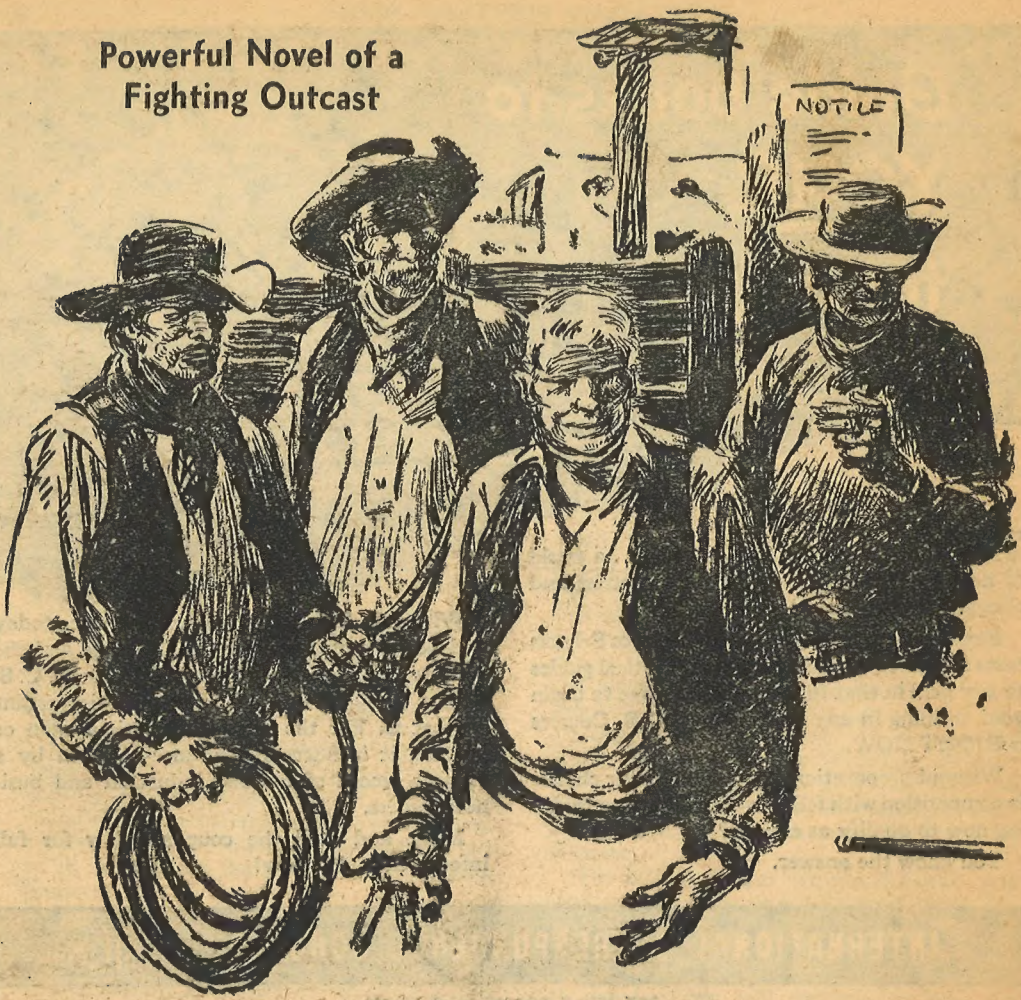

CHAPTER ONE

Pilgrim's Progress

THE Westbound Limited reached Mesquite Springs, Arizona, in the gray hour between daybreak and sunrise. It paused long enough to discharge a single passenger, then got under way again, leaving a heavy swirl of dust in its wake. The dust cloud whipped around the man who had stepped from the train. He had no baggage, other than a two-thirds empty bottle of whiskey in a brown paper bag that he held in one hand. In a pocket of his coat he carried a toothbrush, a small pocket comb, and a razor, wrapped in a narrow razor strop. He had just used these articles in the washroom of the daycoach.

His cheap white shirt was new, and a little damp yet because he had washed it last night in the washbowl of the train and it hadn't quite dried yet. His inexpensive blue serge suit was new also, but he had slept in it all the way from the East, and it was badly wrinkled. He had on cheap, heavy black cowhide shoes of the sort convicts make in a prison shoe shop, and the blue suit was the kind they give a convict when he is released and walks out the prison gates a free man.

He wore no hat, and his close-cropped hair was a lifeless yellow color, graying slightly at the temples. He was tall and gaunt-cheeked, and there was a peculiar ashen pallor to his skin. His eyes, sky-blue under uneven brows that gave him a kind of a quizzical expression, were fever-bright, the whites bloodshot. His nose and jaw were clean-cut, but there was a bitter twist to his wide, rather thin-lipped mouth.

He stood there on his long legs while the dust swirl settled, powdering his hair and face and cheap clothing. His blue eyes took in the

SMOKE-CURED!

By

WALT COBURN

When the Westbound dropped Jeff Jones, ex-convict, off at Mesquite Springs that bitter day, Destiny slipped an ace up his sleeve. . . . He could play it, however, only if he could find again the fighting guts to blaze a gunsmoke trail, back to a life he thought forever lost!

Jeff's eyes were as cold blue as chipped ice.

dingy little dark-red shed that served as a depot. Then he looked across the tracks and saw a dusty street, bordered by a row of weathered frame and adobe buildings, four of them saloons. There was a general mercantile store and a restaurant and barbershop. A two-storied frame building, the only one in town, bore a sign that said, HOTEL.

The newcomer muttered to himself as he stared around at this matutinal desolation.

"Horace Greely said it: 'Go West, young man!' And that Leech at Sing Sing repeated the advice, with a bit of medical seasoning to flavor it. Dry, clean air and the healing rays of desert sun. . . . Go West, young man—and keep going till you get to the jumping off place. And take your damned tainted prison stench along. Lose yourself, your identity. Then quietly die out there and fill an unmarked grave, you un-wanted ex-convict!"

The man took the bottle from the wrinkled paper bag and pulled the cork with his strong white teeth and spat the cork into the dust and gravel of the railway roadbed. Then he tilted the bottle and drank. He drained the bottle and smashed it against the steel rails.

Mesquite Springs, Arizona: The end of the line. He had stood in front of a large railroad wall map in the great Union Station a week ago. He had shut his eyes and poked a forefinger against the map. Thus he had picked the spot.

"Mesquite Springs, Arizona," he had told the man at the ticket window. "One-way ticket."

There had been money left after he'd paid for his ticket. He could have traveled first class and Pullman. But he did not feel like going to sleep in a sleeping car berth behind heavy closely drawn curtains, shut into a dark berth. He had been shut in too long. And somebody, somewhere, had once described sleep as the little brother of Death. And he'd be taking that last long sleep soon enough if the Leech at Sing Sing had told the truth. Anyhow, it was better to be surrounded by people—voices that talked and laughed. It was pleasant to hear those kind of voices again.

He found tobacco and papers and rolled a cigarette and pulled the smoke into his lungs. It made him cough, a racking cough that shook his wasted frame until he had to sit down. There was blood on the cheap white handkerchief with which he wiped his colorless lips.

"Almost on this very spot," sounded a sort of chuckling voice from behind and above him, "I threw my first ruby in the dust of Mesquite Springs. . . . A brakeman had just tossed me out of a box car. But he proved a good Samaritan in disguise. Look at me now. Do I look like a lunger chasing the cure?"

THE man sitting in the dust looked up. At first all he could see was a paunch, then a red moon of a face with a pair of twinkling brown eyes and a heavy thatch of bushy, snow-white hair. The speaker had two bulging railway mail sacks slung over heavy shoulders. He was dressed in khaki pants and shirt and instead of shoes he wore Mexican sandals called *huaraches*.

"I slept through the rumble of the Westbound," the moon-faced man chuckled, "there on the rickety bench in our depot—slept on when the mail clerk tossed his sacks into the doorway. It was the tinkling crash of a broken bottle that roused me from my slumbers. . . . Arise, stranger! Together, arm in arm, we shall travel the distance between here and the nearest of yonder alcoholic emporiums. You are fortunate. This desert oasis could boast of no more than two such palaces of inebrity when I honored Mesquite Springs with a visitation—and lingered on."

He shifted the heavy cords of both mail sacks to his left hand and reached down a thick tanned hand. "I'm Emmett Greely," he said, "but no kin to the immortal Horace. That lack of kinship, however, shall remain our secret, for on occasion I pass myself off as a direct descendant. I own, publish, edit and write every damned thing that goes into the Mesquite Springs Oracle, which comes off my press at infrequent intervals. I am also the Postmaster and Mayor. In the latter official capacity I bid you welcome to Mesquite Springs!"

The man from Sing Sing got to his feet. He slapped the dust from his wrinkled serge suit, wiped his hands on the soiled handkerchief, and gripped the tanned hand of the paunchy Emmett Greely.

"I'm—my name is Jones," he said in his dry, husky voice. "Jefferson Davis Jones—although no kin to Jefferson Davis." And he managed a thin, twisted grin.

"I'll have you tough as rawhide in six months, Jeff," declared Emmett Greely. "My friends call me Em—and it's half past first drink time."

Jefferson Davis Jones spilled tobacco into a thin wheat straw paper, rolling it into shape with one hand.

"First time I ever saw it done," beamed Emmett Greely.

Jefferson Davis Jones licked the cigarette and lit it. "I learned that in Sing Sing Prison," he stated bluntly.

Emmett Greely's moon-face reddened. "Look here, you damned fool! You needn't have said that. Forget it. Nobody out here gives a continental damn about your backtrail."

"You knew it, Greely. I read it in your eyes."

"The name's Em to you, son. And you read too damned much. Come along! We'll get drunk. Say, what day is it—Tuesday? I always get drunk on Tuesdays."

Em Greely slowed his short-legged stride to keep pace with the long-legged shuffle of Jeff Jones. Lugging the bulging mail sacks, they were sweating by the time they reached the first saloon.

A burly saloon keeper was snoring in one

of his heavy barroom armchairs, a copy of the Mesquite Springs Oracle spread over his face. He came awake with a snort as Em Greely started around the end of the bar to help himself.

"Hold on there Em!" rasped a whiskey voice. "You ain't paid yet—"

"Come, come, my friend," soothed Em Greely. "If you will just take a look through that paper you will find I made no mention of your crooked gambling games or your doctoring grain alcohol with tobacco juice for the sheepherder trade. . . . Meet Jefferson Davis Jones, Tub. He's a direct descendant of the immortal Jeff Davis."

EM GREELY winked at Jeff Jones. "I run a blackmail sheet," he said candidly. "In return for not publishing the truth about Tub McCaffrey and other prominent citizens of Mesquite Springs, I eke out a few drams of rotgut forty-rod likker, a room and bed at the Hotel, meals at the Chink's, and daily barbering at Italian Jack's!"

"And that's no lie," scowled Tub McCaffrey. "Blackmail of the rankest sort. . . . Glad to make your acquaintance, Jones. Ye look peaked. Chasin' the cure?"

"He is," said Em Greely. "And he's come to the proper spot on the map. Set out the bottle of real McCoy, Tub. And read the news. Terrence McCaffrey, Superintendent of the School Board. . . . Nice title, Tub."

"There ain't no school board! Hell, there ain't even a school!"

"But a resounding title, Terry, for all its emptiness."

"Last time," Terrence McCaffrey shook his grizzled cropped head, "it was Superintendent of the Street Cleanin' Department. And before that, Poundmaster, Collector of Customs and Taxes, Historian, and Librarian!" A heavy chuckle shook the barman's huge frame and his sharp gray eyes twinkled in flesh pouches under battered, scarred brows.

"Terry once went seventeen rounds with John L. Sullivan in San Francisco," said Em Greeley. "One day I'll print his picture, squared off with John L., and run the story. It would sell a thousand copies on the Barbary Coast."

Tub McCaffrey banged a big, broken-knuckled fist on the bar. His squinted eyes glinted and there was an ugly look on his whiskey-veined face with its splayed nose and misshapen ears.

"Ye'll keep your damned trap shut!" he roared. "Print one word av it and—"

"Until I do sound off, Terrence," Em Greely's voice had lost its chuckle somehow, "you'll do nothing at all, my plug-ugly amigo. Perhaps I made mention of the Barbary Coast by way of gentle warning. Jefferson Davis Jones is my friend. We belong to the same brotherhood of the Damned, ranking well up among the cohorts of the Lost. He plans to reside here. Treat Jeff well, Terrence, and while you're at it pass that bit of advice on among your blackleg amigos. Or so help me, I will emblazon the true story of Terrible Terry McCaffrey on the front page, together with a pair of photographs, front view and profile, with Bertillion measurements. And you can chase this drink on the house with that, Tubby my friend." And Em Greely beamed at Jeff now and lifted his glass of whiskey.

"Your health, Jeff!" he said, and they drank.

The hulking saloonman's face looked mottled. His wicked little eyes slitted under battered brows as he downed his own drink at a gulp. Then he suddenly leaned across the bar and stared hard into Jeff's face.

"Pardoned?" His whiskey voice dropped to a confidential whisper. "Paroled? Or did yuh saw out?"

Jeff Jones grinned bitterly. "Pardoned. But I didn't think it showed that plain."

"If the lad's your friend, Em," said McCaffrey, "take him to the store. Them prison shoes squeak too loud." And he filled the three glasses again.

"Terry's done time," Em explained to Jeff, "so he reads the earmarks. And there are one or two others around here who have lockstepped. Your advice is excellent, Terry. And all this is strictly under your hat."

"When did ye ever hear me waggin' a loose tongue?" demanded McCaffrey. "But by the way, Em, while you was locked in your newspaper office all night, Cliff Wilder rode into town, orderin' cars. His Box X outfit is shippin' a trainload of beef tomorrow. Cliff asked about your health. He said he hoped it wasn't too good. He got a bottle and rode back to camp. He's got blood in his eye, Em."

"Then Clifford is still ramrodding the Box X outfit?"

"This is his last shipment. He's quittin' after this one, he says."

"Before the Box X ties the can to his bushy wolf tail, you mean!"

TERRY McCAFFREY filled their empty glasses and nodded. "You shouldn't have printed that piece about Cliff Wilder and the Wyoming Cattle War, Em."

"I mentioned no man by name, Terry."

"But no man but Cliff Wilder fits the description of that rustler and killer you wrote about. You shouldn't a' done it, Em. What got into ye?"

"I'm a newspaperman, Terry. Printer's ink in my veins. Stick me and I'll bleed black ink."

"It'll be a .45 slug that'll spill it, Em, red

or black. That Cliff Wilder plays fer keeps."

"Clifford Wilder," Em Greely lifted his filled glass, "is a damned cattle rustler and bushwhacking murderer. I've got his record on file."

"But why did ye want to start smokin' out a man like Wilder?"

"I'll print the story one of these days, Terry. My reasons are perhaps a bit obscure. Let it ride for now." And he downed his drink and took Jefferson Davis Jones by the arm.

"Jeff and I will return, Terrence. Meanwhile, we're starting his cure. We shall get inebriated, quaffing from the cup that cheers. Obliterating, under its kindly influence, the bitterness of past regrets and irrigating the taste buds that shall flower into roseate dreams. *Adiosita!*"

Emmett Greely awakened the store-keeper. When he had outfitted Jeff Jones with a whole outfit of clothes, including Levi overalls and a Stetson hat and a pair of cowpuncher boots, they carried the clothing to Emmett Greely's hotel room.

"There's a bathroom at the end of the hall," said Em Greely. "You'll find me at the Oracle office. I've got this mail to sort." And he left Jeff with a bottle of rye.

But before the editor was out of the door, Jeff halted him. "Why," he asked, "are you taking all this trouble to befriend an ex-convict?"

"I came West to die, too, Jeff—a long time ago. I'd lost the zest for living, but I found it again out here on the desert. I recognized that same brand marked on you and you looked worth saving. I wouldn't go to the trouble for the average stranger. Life can be good—even when it don't look worth a counterfeit lead dollar. I *know*. How old are you, Jeff?"

"Thirty."

"You look nearer fifty. Six months, a year from now, you'll pass for twenty-five—about the age you were when they sent you to Sing Sing for embezzlement. First National Bank, wasn't it? I'd have gambled then you were taking the rap for somebody higher up and I'll still give a hundred to one odds that you did. Some men do prison time easy; others take it the hard way. You belong to the latter category. A year from now you'll be back in the saddle. A stock saddle—not a polo saddle. You'll like it out West, Jeff."

"How—who did you—"

"I was a sports editor once. And my little Oracle is on a big exchange list. When a five-goal polo player goes to the pen, it's news. Hell, man, I've watched you ride down a polo field plenty of times! Damnit, don't question me with whys and wherefores. Gimme that bottle! I said we'd get drunk and so help me Uncle Horace, we will! Now get your bath and get into some clothes that fit you." Emmett Greely stood there, short, tubby, grinning lop-sidedly at Jefferson Davis Jones. Then he wheeled and stomped out, hauling his bulging mail sacks after him.

Jeff Jones soaked himself in hot suds, then finished with a tub of cold, clear water. And later, back in Emmett Greely's room, he pulled on the cowpuncher boots and Levis and the blue flannel shirt and Stetson hat. With his pale skin and bony frame he looked like a tragic caricature of a cowboy and had to take a big drink to give him enough nerve to walk out of the room and out onto the street.

Em Greely met him outside the Oracle office and they went into the Chinaman's.

"Shake hands with Wong Pong, Jeff," Em Greely said. "He's got a heart big as a bucket. Hatchet man for the Hip Sing Tong." And he finished in a firecracker sing-sing of Chinese which Jeff couldn't understand.

The Chinaman's parchment skin crinkled in a grin as he shook hands with Jeff. After that, he cooked them the best steak Jeff Jones had ever eaten.

"One man name Cliff Wilder lookee for you, Emmy," Wong Pong volunteered. "Talkee tough. Talkee mean. No likee."

EM GREELY had a hundle of folded newspapers with him. The Oracle, he informed Jeff Jones, offered free delivery service to all local subscribers. He shoved one the newspapers at Wong Pong and the Chinaman opened it. Jeff Jones blinked when he saw an entire column in Chinese print lettering.

"We'll cross the Cliff Wilder bridge, Wong Pong, when we come to it," Em Greely said.

Wong Pong read the Chinese column, his dark eyes shining. He got out a ledger and made marks in it with a tiny brush dipped in India ink. Em Greely's moon-faced beamed. He told Wong Pong to drop in at the Oracle office and help himself to as many copies as he wanted to send to his relatives, friends and enemies. When Jeff reached into his pocket for money to pay for the breakfast, the paunchy little newspaperman told him it was paid for.

"We eat on the house till the next edition, son," he said. "Your money is all wooden nickles."

At the barbershop, Jeff was introduced to a villainous-looking Italian with curly, graying hair and a quick smile that changed the entire expression of his knife-scarred face. Italian Jack was made of solid hard fat, but his white barber's jacket was spotless. Jeff Jones waited while Italian Jack gave Em Greely the works. Em talked through a snowy mound of lather, and Jeff speculated idly on what would happen to some enemy tilted there

on his back for a shave. Italian Jack's razor slithered and scraped.

"The Black Hand put the skids under Jack here," Em's voice came out of the lather. "He's Genoese. Hates Sicilians."

Jeff caught his breath. The razor slid like a streak of light across the lathered throat. Em chuckled. It had been the head, not the cutting edge of the blade. Italian Jack's chuckle was deeper-toned than Em's, and Jeff relaxed. Emmett Greely paid for his shave with a copy of the latest edition of the Oracle, in which there was a full column in Italian.

"Thisa Jeff, Em? She'sa all right?"

"Right as rain, Jack."

"Lasta night comes that son-of-a-gun Wilder again. He's a' talk. I no lika that kinda talk. Nexta time he sit in my chair for a shave, you gimme the nod. Accident she'll happen to the besta men." Italian Jack stropped his razor, his white teeth gleaming. But it wasn't a pleasant grin.

"You're a friend, Jack." Em shook his barbered shaggy head. "But we'd better wait. We'll just give that blackleg Wilder enough rope to hang himself. You've got the missus and kids. There might be a law. It wouldn't see eye to eye with us on the throat-slitting. Hold the thought, though—for an ace in the hole."

They went into the store again. Felix Floyd was a tall lean man with a bald head and watery, pale blue eyes—a lunger who had chased the cure here and regained his health. The Post Office was here in the store, and Floyd did most of the work connected with it. Em shoved a copy of the Oracle across the counter, beaming. But his brown eyes were shrewd, calculating, and his voice, when he spoke finally, was not overly friendly.

"You made the local column, Felix," Em Greely announced. "The term applied to you is fence-straddler. Peruse the item slowly and with care. Read between the lines and profit thereby."

"Looky here, Greely!" Felix Soper had a nasal whine. "You can't run no whizzer on me! You go tryin' it, and mebbeso you'll bite off more'n you can chew!"

"Were those your last words before they gave you a coat of tar and feathers and rode you out of town on a rail? Joplin, Missouri, wasn't it, Floyd?" Emmett Greely's chuckle had no mirth in it.

The storekeeper's bony lantern-jawed face looked gray. "Now looky here, Em. You can't do a man thataway—"

"The hell I can't! Come along, Jeff. This place stinks."

And they walked out arm in arm.

You ease off beard in jigtime, men,
With Thin Gillettes—four blades for ten—
They save you dough and treat you well—
And your face sure looks and feels swell!
Outlast ordinary blades two to one
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
Gillette
4 for 10¢
Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

CHAPTER TWO

Under Western Stars

EMMETT GREELY and Jefferson Davis Jones got tight. The paunchy little newspaperman took Jeff Jones down the line of saloons. They did not amount to much. Rotgut booze and dirty spitoons. . . . Terry McCaffrey had the only real saloon in town, so finally they went back there. Afterward they walked across the sand half a mile to an unpainted frame and whitewashed adobe place called the Half-Mile House. Em had timed their visit to the Half-Mile House until starlight. From behind closed doors and curtained windows came the banging of an out-of-tune piano, the sound of women's voices uplifted stridently.

"Tombstone has its Bird Cage Opera House, Jeff, and Mesquite Springs has the Half-Mile House. We're proud of our den of iniquity." And Em Greely shoved open the front door and bowed Jeff in.

A tall, strikingly handsome woman with natural red hair greeted Emmett Greely warmly. She had to lower her handsome head to kiss him. Her eyes were gray-green—the kind of eyes that could be hard as green glass. But they were soft now.

"You worry me, Emmett," she said in a soft, husky voice. "Wilder is making fight talk."

"Sticks and stones, etcetera," chuckled Em. He was blushing like a fat schoolboy just kissed by his teacher. "Erin, I want you to meet a friend of mine, Jefferson Davis Jones. Call him Jeff. He's all right. Jeff, this is Erin McCaffrey. The McCaffrey part is off the record. You met her father, Terry McCaffrey. Enough said."

The grip of Erin McCaffrey's hand was warm and strong and sincere. Her skin was tanned, but not tanned enough to hide a sprinkling of freckles across her short, straight nose.

"Any friend of Emmett Greely's is welcome here," she told Jeff. "As the *paisanos* say, enter your house, Jeff. You need sun. Ever ride a horse?" She was looking at his new high-heeled boots.

Jeff's face flushed a little. Then a twinkle came into his blue eyes. "I hope to learn now," he said.

"I've got just the horse for you," she told him, "gentle and easy-gaited. Em won't go near a horse. I'll have to take you out to my ranch."

Erin McCaffrey motioned to the dozen or more girls sitting now in a decorous row along the far wall and at the girl seated at the piano. They were all Mexican girls, young, pretty, more like country girls from some Mexican village. Which, in fact, they were. They were here to dance. They got a percentage cut on all drinks their dancing partners bought at the bar at the far end of the dance hall, where a gray-haired Mexican tended bar. This was no honkey-tonk joint. These girls were decent and were here only to dance.

"They don't last long." Erin smiled as they stood at the bar. "They get married. *Como no?* Why not? They are the prettiest girls this side of the Mexican border. And if you think they can't cook, stay for dinner with us, or better yet, for breakfast tomorrow morning. Paco can fetch Emmett out in the buckboard, unless he rides the coach with the girls. You and I will ride, Jeff. No, Emmett?"

"Nope. Never let it be said that there is rabbit blood in the veins of Emmett Greely. Nothing but printer's ink, by the beard of Uncle Horace!" Em Greely grinned. But his eyes were brown flint.

"The Box X ships tomorrow," Em said to Jeff, "and Erin's trying to shoo me out of town. She wants me to hide at her Palo Verde ranch, but it's no dice. Another round of the same, Paco." And Em took a roll of bills from his pocket.

THIS was the only place where he had offered to pay for anything, but now Jeff beat him to it and included the Mexican girls in his invitation. The girls all drank a mild wine, Em Greely and Jeff Jones straight whiskey.

Erin McCaffrey's black brows had pulled into a frown. One of her hands, slim, tanned, ringless, closed over Em Greely's on the bar. "You worry your friends, Emmett," she said. "Wilder is a hydrophobia skunk. A mad-dog killer."

"He barks too much for a dog that's dangerous. Scratch his hide and he'll bleed yellow," Em Greely growled curtly.

"Emmett Greely," said Erin, "in case you don't know him that well, Jeff, has a Galahad complex. He elects himself champion of defenseless women. Give him a lost cause and he'll worry it like a bulldog with a bone!"

"Galahad. . . . Bulldog." Em chuckled. "I don't have to walk half a mile through mesquite and cactus to be insulted. I can get that in town."

"Em picked me up out of the dust," said Jeff. "Add stray and lost dudes to the list, Erin. I'm curious to meet this notorious badman, Wilder."

"You'll meet him if you don't get out of town before tomorrow," Erin assured him. "When Cliff Wilder and his Box X hands paint a town, the color is red. I always close up the Half-Mile House when I get word the Box X outfit is coming. And I'm not a

coward, she added simply, matter-of-factly.

Em Greeley tossed his latest copy of The Oracle on the bar and downed his drink.

Erin McCaffrey spread the newspaper out on the bar and for the first time Jeff Jones got a look at the headline: LAW OR OUTLAW?

"For how long," Erin read aloud, "are the decent and law-abiding citizens of Mesquite Springs going to stand for the hoodlum and lawless antics of a certain renegade who spurs his ruthless way unchecked down the peaceful street of our town? A man so degraded, even among his own lawless fraternity, that he has long since worn out what luke-warm welcome he once enjoyed at such outlaw hang-outs as Robbers' Roost and the Hole-in-the-Wall? This man, who travels under many an alias, is riding to a hard fall. I do not expect him to shiver in his fancy boots when he reads this. On the contrary, he will undoubtedly look upon it as some sort of feather in his warbonnet. For he enjoys his tough rep. He travels on it, as the saying goes. And he will flaunt this fresh notoriety which he has bought so cheaply—thus far.

"This is not a warning, nor is it a threat. Let it be construed by honest men as a flat statement of fact. John Law is on his way to Mesquite Springs. Had our citizenry the temerity, the courage of their convictions, they would purchase hammer and nails and the necessary timber from our fence-straddling Felix and erect a gallows for this notorious renegade and his friends. I use the word 'friend' with mental reservations. A man of his craven nature can have no real friends. Perhaps, when the dust of the ruckus settles, there will be need for only one rope. And I hereby volunteer for the chore of tying the hangman's knot.

"However, that is probably too much to expect from the cowed and bullied citizens of Mesquite Springs. They lack the intestinal fortitude to make this gallows gesture. So when the time comes, and I see the long shadow of John Law forecast on the adobe walls of Mesquite Springs, we will content ourselves with a makeshift hangman's tree. I have in mind the long ridgelog jutting out from the roof of Terrence McCaffrey's Last Chance Saloon. . . ."

THERE was more of it, but Erin McCaffrey had quit reading. "I hope you know what you're doing, Emmett." She was smiling a little, but her gray-green eyes were shadowed with worry.

"Take Jeff out to the Palo Verde ranch with you, Erin," Em said. "Give him a man-size breakfast. Keep him out in the sun and fix him up with a cabin. I'll be out one of these days and—"

"Don't deal me out that easy, Em," put in Jefferson Davis Jones. "The Palo Verde ranch sounds good, and I'm truly grateful. But I want a look first at this Cliff Wilder hombre. Say, where does a man borrow or buy a gun around here?"

Emmett Greely shook his bushy white head. "Going Western in a big way, Jeff? You don't need a gun. They're too dangerous in an amateur's hands. And you don't want to lose your amateur standing at Mesquite Springs. Wilder is strictly professional, and so are his cowhands."

"Even David had a rock of some kind," smiled Erin, "when he kayoed Goliath." She was looking straight at Jeff now. "Ever shoot a gun, Jeff?"

"I went to military school in Virginia," said Jefferson Davis Jones.

Erin walked around the end of the bar and reached under it. She pulled out a Colt .38 in a shoulder holster harness, but Em shook his head and shoved it back across the bar.

"You might need it, Erin," he said, "a lot worse than Jeff will. I never packed a gun in my life. Leave it that way for now. Jeff and I will be on our way. I just wanted you two to meet. *Adiosita.*"

As they walked slowly back towards town, Emmett Greely broke the silence. "A lady, Jeff, in every sense of the word. Erin gave up all that every woman wants from life to bury herself alive here in the desert. She won't admit it, even to herself. But when angels sing, their voices will seem flat and off-key by comparison with hers. I heard Erin McCaffrey sing in San Francisco once, billed at Erin Shannon."

"You mean, Em, she's *the* Erin Shannon?"

Em nodded. "Gave up her career, nobody knew why. Disappeared. It's the kind of a story a newspaperman dreams about, son—and one that will never be told. . . ."

Emmett Greely's voice died away in the silence of the desert night. Jeff broke that starlit silence softly, as if voicing his thoughts aloud.

"She loves you, Em. It's deep in her heart. And it shows in her eyes—like a prayer."

"Like a prayer, son. And as far beyond reach as the stars."

Jeff let it go at that. The old bitterness was gnawing within him again, and suddenly he wanted to get drunk. He lengthened his long-legged stride, his face gray in the moonlight.

"Take it easy, son," said Emmett Greely. "Somehow I don't believe she's worth it. Yank yourself up out of that black hell. Damn it to hell, she couldn't be worth that much!"

Jeff halted in his tracks. He was breathing hard and his gaunt face glistened with cold sweat. His thin lips twisted in a bitter grin.

"She was damned beautiful, Em—like sun-

rise on a glacier peak. And I was sucker enough to think there was real warmth underneath. So I played the damned fool. Look at this."

Jefferson Davis Jones took a wallet from his pocket, and from it a folded bit of paper. He shoved it into Emmett Greely's hand. Em unfolded it and lit a match for light. Then he stared, his brown eyes wide, a soundless whistle pursing his lips. He was looking at a cashier's check for fifty thousand dollars!

"That's what they paid me," Jeff said in a brittle voice, "for a stretch in Sing Sing. Set that match to it, Em!"

"Like hell I will!" Em carefully folded the cashier's check and tucked it away quickly in his own wallet. He didn't like the icy look in the blue eyes of Jefferson Davis Jones. Jeff's fists clenched, and they glared at one another.

"Easy, son. Take it easy," said Em Greely softly. "It'd be a grand gesture, sure, but there's nobody but a broken-down newspaper hack with a jag on to see it. And somehow I wouldn't appreciate it for its real worth. Fifty thousand isn't stage money. If it was fifty million it couldn't buy back what you lost in the Big House. But such as it is, it's not to be tossed aside like a paper doll. You earned this money the first night you spent there. They sold you down the river."

"I wouldn't touch a dollar of it if I—"

"Shut up, Jeff." Em Greely's voice was level-toned. "Who sold you the idea that you're the only guy that ever got railroaded into the pen?"

SOMETHING in that pair of steady brown eyes stopped whatever Jeff Jones was going to say. Em was smiling faintly.

"You too, Em?"

"Me, Em. But nobody handed me fifty thousand dollars when I walked away from San Quentin." Then, suddenly, the old man chuckled. "I'd have rammed it down somebody's throat if they had."

"Then what the hell—"

"Pull this clean air deep into your chest, son! Take a look at those stars up yonder. A year from now you'll know what I'm talkin' about. You won't feel then like crawlin' off into the brush to die like a sick dog!"

"You think I'm doggin' it, Em?"

"We all dog it, one time or another—men with more guts than you and I, Jeff. Show me a man that says he's never felt sorry for himself and I'll show you a damn' liar. I've seen the toughest of 'em crack. I slapped a bottle of poison out of the hand of the richest millionaire on San Francisco's Nob Hill, and cut a man down when he tried to hang himself—an hombre they called the toughest gent on the Barbary Coast. I covered the Chinatown and Barbary Coast when I was on the old Call. And I was sittin' high on the ladder when they yanked it out from under me. But hell, I was tough. I could take it. But then they hurt somebody I cared a lot about, and that tore it. You don't need a gun or a knife to kill a man, not when there's hate enough in your heart. You can do a damned thorough job with your hands. . . ."

Em Greely sighed. Then he went on: "The greatest criminal lawyer on the Pacific Coast took my case, free. We'd been on many a drinking binge together and he knew me better than ever I knew myself. I'd killed a man, and I wanted the world to know I'd killed him with my hands and why. All the lawyers on earth couldn't have cleared me when I told it in that crowded courtroom. My lawyer let me talk, then entered a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity. It was the only deal he could make with the Law. And so help me Uncle Horace he wasn't lying. But I was broken when I got out, broken on their damned crooked wheel. . . . But I'd helped smash one of the dirtiest political gangs that ever tried to scuttle a city! After that the rats scurried away and Emmett Greely took his torn lungs away from that San Francisco fog—a bum riding a box car. I was kicked off here in the desert to die. Then a woman with more courage than you and I will ever know, showed me those stars up yonder. . . . Amen! I've talked too much. Let's rest a weary foot on the brass rail." And the old editor heaved a sigh.

They walked the rest of the way to town in silence, side by side, Em Greely's hair gleaming white as spun silver in the moonlight.

It was a short distance and they covered it in less than half an hour, walking under the desert stars. And Jefferson Davis Jones had found himself before they reached town. Em Greely had left most of it unsaid, for Jeff to figure out and fit into his own broken pattern of life. The words the newspaperman had spoken were pungent and strong and ripped out by the roots. It was almost as if he had transfused some of his own reclaimed strength and courage into the veins of Jefferson Davis Jones. And it had warmed Jeff's heart and soul.

They reached the edge of town and Jeff halted. He held out his hand with a crooked sort of grin. "Call it by any name, Em. It's something like a miracle. Thanks."

"We ain't started yet, Jeff," Em Greely murmured.

Then he said he had a chore to attend to at the Oracle office and for Jeff to go to Terry McCaffrey's Last Chance and he'd join him there after a while. Em was humming softly to himself as he went down the deserted cowtown street.

CHAPTER THREE

Behind the Eight-Ball!

THERE was a battered-looking pool table at the rear of the Last Chance. Jeff told the big saloon-keeper he'd wait there till Em returned. Terry nodded, his battered brows pulled into a worried scowl. He started to say something; then changed his mind and began polishing an already cleaned and polished whiskey glass.

Jeff racked the pool balls and finally found a cue that hadn't lost its tip. He chalked the cue and broke the racked balls. It was a neat break for a man who hadn't had a pool cue in his hand for years. He was beginning his second solitary game when Emmett Greely came in through the swinging half doors.

But this time Em Greely was not alone. There were four tough-looking cowhands with him, all with cartridge belts and holstered six-shooters. Em's nose was bleeding, one eye was bruised and shut, and his clothes were ripped to rags. There was the running noose of a saddle rope around the old editor's neck as he stood there swaying on his feet, his eyes fixed on Jeff with a blank, unrecognizing stare. He shook his blood-spattered white head at Terry McCaffrey as a heavy bung-starter appeared in the saloon-keeper's hairy hand.

"Keep your shirt on, Terrence," Em Greely said, and grinned faintly at his friend.

Jeff knew instinctively that the tall, heavy-set man with the coarse black hair and week's wiry stubble of black whiskers was Cliff Wilder. Wilder had pale gray eyes and a hawk-beaked nose. He stared around him bleakly.

"Directly Felix Floyd fetches the materials," Cliff Wilder's voice was flat-toned and ugly, "we're fixin' this old coot up with a shore purty suit of tar and feathers. And then we're ridin' him out to the Half-Mile house on a rail. You wouldn't be aimin' to take sides, would yuh, McCaffrey?"

Wilder's right hand was on his gun. The other three tough cowpunchers looked ready and anxious to start a ruckus. They gave Jeff a hard, cold-eyed scrutiny, then immediately dismissed him as harmless. Jeff felt shame. He knew he looked skinny and sick and somewhat ridiculous in his new Stetson hat and high-heeled store boots. Spots of color stained Jeff's thin gray cheeks. But as he stood there, lifting the rack from the massed triangle of pool balls, his eyes were cold-blue as chipped ice.

"Deal Terry out," said Em Greely. "Set 'em up, Terrence. The Oracle seems to be stuck for these drinks."

"Who's that skinny hombre yonder, playin' lonesome pool?" taunted Wilder. "New cowboy in town! Yippy! What outfit you work for, Skinny? Monkey Ward or Shears Rowback?" His laugh was ugly, challenging.

"A man should shoot the high heels off them store boots, Cliff," suggested a short, heavy-bellied man with bowed legs. "He's bound to pull up lame walkin' the railroad ties in them heels." And he slid a six-shooter from its holster.

Jeff had the cue ball in his hand. It was an underhand throw—so swift, so unexpected, that not a man in the place saw it coming until the dirty white ball hit the man with the gun square between the eyes. He let out a grunting sigh and sagged, the gun falling from his relaxed fingers.

BEFORE the man could hit the floor there was another pool ball in Jeff's hand. This time he made an overhand throw with the black eight ball, and blood spurted as it spatted with a sickening crack against Cliff Wilder's nose. A few inches higher and it would have caved in Wilder's forehead and killed him. Wilder's two hundred pounds went limp as he toppled sideways against the bar and Em Greely had to step back quickly out of the way of the falling Box X ramrod.

"Five ball in the side pocket, Em!" Jeff called out, and then was winding up again, like a baseball pitcher. The five ball hit a cowpuncher on the shoulder and caromed off to strike his companion alongside the jaw.

"Billiard!" yelled Jefferson Davis Jones. Then the twelve ball sank deep into the belly of one of the Box X men who had just pulled his gun. The man gasped and the gun slid from his hand as he doubled up, grabbing his stomach.

The seven ball hit the last man in the back of the head as he turned and started for the door. He sprawled headlong and lay moaning.

"Well I'll be tee-totally damned!" wheezed the whiskey voice of Terry McCaffrey.

"And the man with the high-heeled boots," chuckled Em Greely, "gets four cigars."

Jeff had a pool ball in each hand. He put them back on the table.

"I forgot," he grinned, "to bank the last shot."

Felix Floyd was coming in through the swinging half doors, blinking his near-sighted watery eyes, his arms filled with big feather pillows.

Jeff reached down and picked up a pool ball. He wound up and let go. The thirteen ball hit Felix Floyd a little low, below the belt. He let out a bellow of pain and dropped the pillows, then stumbled and fell to the saloon floor, writhing and groaning. Finally he vomited.

Terry McCaffrey gave an angry yell and

came around the end of the bar. He picked up the storekeeper and hurled him bodily into the street.

"Messin' up my clean floor, the damned scut!" he swore. Then he glared down at Wilder and his three tough hands and cursed them. He would have swung his boot at the four half-conscious cowpunchers, but Em Greely shook his head.

Em took the catch rope from around his neck, and coiling it, dropped it on Cliff Wilder's blood-smeared face. Then he looked at Jeff Jones. "Not even the Barbary Coast in its palmiest days and nights," he said softly, "ever saw the beat of that. Eh, Terrence?"

"I wouldn't a believed it could be done," wheezed Terry McCaffrey. He was behind his bar now. He dusted off a sealed bottle and twisted in the corkscrew.

"Twenty-year old stuff," said Terry. "This is the first time I ever felt the need of breakin' it out."

"I'd almost forgotten, Jeff," chuckled Em Greely. "You pitched a season with the bush league."

Cliff Wilder was the first of the Box X outfit to show signs of life as Terry sloshed a bucket of water over him and told him to wake up and pay for his lodgin'.

Wilder groaned and rolled over and got to his hands and knees, his sagging head dripping water and blood. Terry had gathered the fallen guns and piled them on the back bar. Then he was dousing each man in turn with bucketsful of dirty water bailed from the big rinsing tub behind the bar.

The saloon-keeper had kicked the big feather pillows outside to the street, where somebody had rolled a barrel of tar from the general mercantile store in readiness for the ceremony. Felix Floyd had crawled away, probably back to his store.

IT was on Cliff Wilder that Jeff and Em and Terry now centered their attention. The big Box X ramrod was tough and game enough. He shook his sodden black head and spat blood and got onto his feet. Unsteady from the pain, he felt of his smashed nose. He cut a hard look at Terry and his venomous stare fixed Em Greely for a few seconds and then he was looking straight at Jeff Jones. He shook his head, then grinned crookedly.

"Who'd a thunk it!" Cliff Wilder said, looking Jeff over from head to foot. "You look like death warmed over, but you shore git a job done."

Cliff Wilder looked around at his tough cowhands who were now coming out of it, grinning derisively at them as they eyed Jeff Jones. He was the only one of his sorry-looking outfit to take his medicine with a smile.

"We could use a drink, Tub," Wilder said.

"Not in my place, Wilder. You're on the Injun list." Terry McCaffrey filled Jeff's and Em's and his own short glasses, then pointedly corked the bottle of twenty-year old whiskey and put it under the bar.

"Now would be a good time, Em," said the saloon-keeper, "to shove Wilder and his saddle bums right outa town—and Felix Floyd along with 'em."

Emmett Greely was wiping the last drops of blood from his swollen nose. One of his eyes was swollen and black, but the other glinted like brown agate.

"They were laying for me when I opened the door of the Oracle office," said Em Greely.

"I seen 'em ride into town after dark," Terry McCaffrey said. "They didn't come into my place, but they looked like they was up to somethin'. Then I seen Wilder go into Floyd's store. I was kinda worried."

"You got a right to be worried." Cliff Wilder stood spraddle-legged and hitched up his cartridge belt with its empty holster. "If I was you, McCaffrey, I'd sell out cheap and ketch the next train. That goes double for Emmett Greely. And you better take that long-geared mail order cowboy along. These boys can't take a joke. Yeah, if I was you, I'd sure haul freight a long ways from Mesquite Springs."

"That's large, loud talk," said Em Greely, "for a blackleg renegade."

Wilder grinned crookedly and spat blood on the floor. "For a would-be newspaper gent, Greely, you shore don't keep up with the latest."

"Don't tell me," said Em Greely. "Let me guess. You cleaned your Wyoming slate."

"Clean as a fish's belly. Them old indictments ag'in Clifford Wilder is marked off the books in Wyoming."

"Wyoming still needs a few good hangings to clean it," said Em. "But the owners of the Box X still won't enjoy the idea of having a cattle rustler ramrodding their outfit. They're city dudes, but they're not that tender-minded."

"They claim the Box X is losin' 'em money," Cliff Wilder grinned, "so they're sellin' out. And guess who's buyin' the Box X, Greely?"

"I used up the only guess I had coming. You tell me, Wilder."

Cliff Wilder wiped his bloody nose on his sleeve, his pale gray eyes glittering. "Mister Felix Floyd," he measured each word out slowly, "is buyin' the Box X. And I'm ramroddin' it for Felix from here on." Cliff Wilder walked to the bar. "Give us our guns, Tub. We're movin' on."

EM GREELY told Terry McCaffrey to give Wilder and his men their six-shooters. Guns were cheap; they could get all the artil-

lery they needed at Floyd's store, anyhow."

"This seems to alter the situation, Terrence," Em Greely remarked to the saloonowner. "Don't forget to tip your hat to Mister Felix Floyd when you meet him on the street next time. And when you want your boots shined, Clifford, drop around at the Oracle office."

Terry gave Em a puzzled look as he shoved the guns across the bar. "But you're still on the Injun list here, mister," he told Wilder.

"We'll take our trade down the street, Tub. Come along, boys." Then he gave Jeff a long, hard look. "I can't figger you yet, pilgrim. But if you're casin' the cure, you shore come to the wrong place to live long—if yuh git what I mean!"

When Cliff Wilder and his men had gone, Emmett Greely directed Terry to set out the bar bottle. "So Felix Floyd," he mused aloud as he studied his filled glass, is buying the Box X."

A quarter of an hour later when they heard the pounding of shod hoofs, Terry blew out the big lamp, and Em told Jeff to flatten himself on the floor. Wilder and his three men rode past at a run, six-shooters blazing. The Last Chance was filled for a few brief moments with a hail of .45 lead. Then the riders were gone and Terry lighted the big swinging lamp and Em and Jeff crawled out from under the pool table.

Off in the distance a passenger train whistled, and Emmett Greely abruptly grabbed Jeff's arm. "Gimme what money you've got in the till, Terrence," he said, "quick! We're got to flag that train!"

"You ain't lettin' Wilder run you outa town, Em?"

"Hell, no! We're going into the cattle business!"

They started at a run for the dingy little depot, then slowed down as they saw the station agent out on the tracks with a red lantern, waving the passenger train to a stop.

Felix Floyd stood in the shadow of the station, waiting to take the train. There was a bulging carpetbag in his hand.

Emmett Greely went up to the lanky storekeeper, a smile on his round face. Jeff stood right behind the paunchy little newspaperman.

"Go back to your store, Felix." Em Greely's voice purred. "Don't crowd your luck. It's soured."

"Mind your own business, Greely," snapped Felix Floyd. "I'll take care of mine."

The smile never left Em's round face, despite its swollen nose and one black eye. His head lowered, he charged like a bull, butting the lanky storekeeper in the stomach.

Felix Floyd let out a pained yell. He dropped the bulging carpetbag and his long legs buckled as he sagged to the platform.

The train paused only long enough for two passengers to swing aboard. Felix Floyd was still lying there, moaning and retching beside the dingy red depot, when the train pulled out.

Emmett Greely and Jefferson Davis Jones planted themselves in the smoking compartment of the day coach.

"Two cash fares to Phoenix," Em beamed at the conductor. He pulled a quart bottle from his hip pocket and borrowed a corkscrew from the sleepy porter.

"The first there with cash on the barrelhead, son," Em beamed at Jeff, "takes the Box X." And he took Jeff's cashier's check for $50,000 from his wallet, kissed it reverently, and hand-

ed it to Jeff with a ceremonious gesture.

"Lay that on the line, son," he said softly.

CHAPTER FOUR

War Talk!

JEFF JONES and Emmett Greely got back to Mesquite Springs two days later. The drab little cowtown looked the same from the distance. Not until they had crossed the tracks did they see that every window in every building fronting the main street had been shot out. The newspaper office was a shambles. So was the Last Chance Saloon.

Terrence McCaffrey stood in the doorway of his wrecked saloon. He glowered at them as they came up. "Cowboys!" Terry spat out vindictively. "Damn 'em to hell!"

"Tip your hat, Terrence," beamed the moon-faced Em Greely, "to the new owner of the big Box X outfit—Mister Jefferson Davis Jones!"

"I don't own a hat. And if I did—say, how's that, again, Greely?"

"That's why we pulled out in such a rush," explained Em Greely. "Cliff Wilder spoke out of turn and it gave us an idea. Could it be, Terrence, my friend, that you were under the impression that we had rabbited?"

"Ain't had much reason," growled the big saloonman, "to think otherwise. And you sure as hell wasn't underfoot here when Cliff Wilder and his Box X outfit tore the town apart and left it this way. Besides, even if the pilgrim here had somethin' to use for money, why did you let 'im buy a gold brick like the Box X? Wilder's gutted that outfit long since."

"You a cattleman, Terrence?"

"Nope. And neither are you or this pool-ball pitcher. But Cliff Wilder works at it."

"If there's a round of drinks left in your place, Terrence, kindly set 'em up and spill us the news."

Terry stood behind his bullet-riddled bar and brought out the bottle of twenty-year old stuff. He said the punchers hadn't bothered the bulk of his liquor stock down in the cellar. He also told Em and Jeff that Cliff Wilder and his Box X hands had shipped a trainload of cattle, then had proceeded to really paint the town. The Chinaman and Italian Jack had taken to the brush. Terry had gone out to the Half-Mile House and moved Erin and her girls out to the Palo Verde Ranch. They had stayed there until Wilder and his tough hands had pulled out.

"Wilder beat up Felix Floyd," said Terry, "and then robbed him, to boot. But Floyd won't admit it. Why?"

"Felix Floyd," said Em Greely dryly, "missed the train. But to hell with Felix Floyd. How's Erin?" he asked solicitously.

"Full of fight. We was ready for 'em at the Palo Verde, and all Wilder and his outfit got there was a red-hot reception. Uncle Zack Taylor and his Mexicans was behind every bush. Wilder's outfit never got within hollerin' distance of the ranch buildin's. . . . Now why in thunder did you let this Jeff lad buy that gold brick, Em?"

"What makes you think it's a gold brick, Terrence?"

"Cliff Wilder's been runnin' that Box X outfit a long time and milkin' it dry. He stole it in the first place from Zack Taylor. Wilder got some lame-brained Phoenix businessmen to put up the little cash he needed to grab the outfit after the drought had damn near wiped out Uncle Zack Taylor. After they got the Box X dirt-cheap, them Phoenix dudes found out they had to keep pourin' more and more dinero into it. Only it was like pourin' good licker into a big funnel and no jug to ketch it in. Wilder never branded enough calves. He never shipped enough beef. Hell, I've listened in when they'd come here to Mesquite with their bellyache and all they ever got outa Cliff Wilder was excuses and promises he never intended keepin'. That Box X is a white elephant."

"Gold brick or white elephant, Terrence," beamed Em Greely, "the Box X belongs to Jefferson Davis Jones. We're on our way to the Palo Verde ranch, now, to see Uncle Zack Taylor."

"Your printin' press, Em. . . . They didn't leave much left of it."

"I'll get another. Come on, Jeff."

They borrowed Terry's buckboard and gentle team. But first they paid a visit to Felix Floyd. Floyd lay propped up in bed, swathed in bandages, his bloodshot pale eyes slitted.

"Inventory what's left of your stock, Floyd," Em Greely told the storekeeper flatly. "Wong Pong and Italian Jack will pay you cash. Then get out of town and don't come back."

AFTER that, they drove to the Palo Verde Ranch. A short, leathery-skinned man with a drooping gray mustache and bright, puckered gray eyes met them at the big adobe barn. He shook hands warmly with Em Greely and then Jeff felt the strong grip of the little old cowman's hand.

"Jeff here bought the Box X outfit, Uncle Zack."

"How much?" Uncle Zack Taylor asked in a creaky voice.

"Fifty thousand cash."

"Git a clean work on that rough range back in the mountains," said Zack Taylor, "and you'll gather enough beef this next year to pay off that fifty thousand. Wilder's bin throwin' that stuff back into the roughs. Gatherin' just

enough to keep them Phoenix dudes from firin' 'im till him and Floyd get get enough money scraped together to make a cash bid on the outfit. The Box X as she stands right now is worth half a million, and that's a rock-bottom estimate. I don't know how you swung the deal, Em, but you got this young feller a shore enough cow outfit. Did he ever see a cow outside of a milk pen?"

"Did you, Jeff?" grinned Em Greely. "It never occurred to me to ask."

"I'm willing," grinned Jeff, "to learn."

"You're hired, Zack," said Em Greely, "to ramrod the Box X. And you can write your own ticket."

Uncle Zack Taylor kept swallowing his Adam's apple, blinking his hard, bright gray eyes that suddenly had misted.

"I got most of my Mexicans here," he finally trusted his creaky voice. "Best cowhands in the country. We bin roundsidin' here at the Palo Verde too long a'ready. Livin', yuh might say, on Miss Erin's charity, at my old home ranch you and her saved outa the deal that robbed me of the bulk of my outfit. But I still got my ponies. You don't know what this means to a man, gents. I got to tell it to Jean. . . ." And Uncle Zack Taylor headed for the corrals.

They had the team put up when a girl rode up on a chunky roan bronc. She looked like a boy in her chaps and denim jacket and battered old hat. Her shoulder-length hair was curly and crisp and black, her eyes a dark gray, almost black. She had a short nose, a firm chin, and her lips were full and red. She flashed them a wide smile, like the grin of a boy, her teeth startling white against her tanned skin.

Then she swung from her saddle and gave Em Greely a hard hug and kissed him. Tears were glistening in her dark eyes.

"You're all white man, Em Greely." Jean Taylor had a soft little voice.

Em chuckled and let her go. Then he told her Jefferson Davis Jones was the fair-haired gent that had gotten back the Box X.

"If you'll wait till I get a box to stand on," she told Jeff, "I'll give you what's left from what I gave Em."

Jeff said she didn't need anything to stand on. He bent down a little and kissed Jean Taylor. Then suddenly he had a curious feeling of weakness at the knees. It had been a long, long time since Jeff Jones had kissed a girl. He had vowed years ago never to let another woman come into his life. And here was this little cow country girl, taking his breath away. He'd taken her to be about fourteen or fifteen, just a tomboy kid. But now, with her face so close to his, he saw his mistake. And her kiss had been a woman's kiss.

Now they stood apart and a sudden awkwardness held them as they looked into each other's eyes. Then Jeff looked around for Em Greely. But Em was gone. Em Greely had gone on to the house to see Erin McCaffrey and tell her the big news.

"I came out West," Jeff said, "to die. But I've changed my mind."

Jean Taylor laughed. "Terry told us about your throwing those pool balls. I'd call it a fair showing for a man with one foot in the grave!"

"Em Greely tricked me into the office of a doctor friend of his at Phoenix," Jeff said. "The Doc said whoever told me I had a spot on my lung was a liar in seven languages. He said all I needed was fresh air and sun and plenty of grub."

"You've come to the right place to get all that, Jeff."

Jeff nodded and grinned. "Doctors don't know the whole score. But it just occurred to me that Emmett Greely might. . . . There was something else wrong with me, something that wasn't good. I think some time I'll tell you about it. It'll bore you deaf, Jean."

"I'll risk it." And Jean Taylor's dark eyes crinkled.

Jeff had been sizing up the roan three-year old. "You've got a good quarter-horse there, Jean."

IT was the way he said it, that flat remark and no more, that convinced Jean Taylor that this lanky pilgrim had horse savvy. She took him on over to the big mesquite corral where the Mexican horse wrangler was corraling the remuda.

"You'll have to use our cavvy, Jeff," she said. "Cliff Wilder set your Box X outfit afoot, but Erin and Uncle Terry helped us salvage the original Box X remuda. Wilder had to buy, borrow but mostly steal enough horses to mount the tough cowhands he fetched with him to this cow country. Now he's drifted and he's hand-picked about a dozen of his toughest hombres to take along. Cliff Wilder can move fast when he's crowded. He's got that trainload of cattle unloaded by now—probably at some little jerkwater siding where there's a loading chute. He doesn't need too much range, a holding ground is enough. And he doesn't need to heat a running iron because he's got the Box X brand registered in the name of Clifford Wilder in New Mexico. He steals cattle from your Box X range in Arizona and trails them through the mountains to his range in New Mexico. There he holds them a while, and then sells them. And unless you catch him in the actual act of running off your stock, you can't arrest him and get a conviction against him for cattle rustling. Cliff Wilder's never used his New Mexico range

till now. That was his ace-in-the-hole, in case he couldn't swing the deal for this spread. He's got to turn up his ace now. But don't fool yourself, Jeff. Cliff Wilder is a long ways from being licked."

Jeff looked at her. "You seem to know all the angles, Jean."

Jean Taylor nodded. She was smiling a little but there was a hard glint in her dark eyes now. "I met Cliff Wilder on his way out of the country," she said, "and he wanted me to go along with him. To hear Cliff tell it, you're a sucker. An easier mark than the Phoenix town dudes he used. Cliff thinks he has the world by the tail."

"But you didn't go along," Jeff said quietly.

"No. The sign wasn't right. But six months or a year from now. . . . *Quien sabe?*"

Jeff's grin faded and something inside seemed to die almost before it had been born. His eyes searched her remotely.

"You'd run off with the man who stole the Box X from your own dad?"

"And marry him, mister. Then I'd mark time—till I'd set my wolf trap. And Cliff Wilder stepped into it."

"Aren't you a little cold-blooded about it?"

"More than a little. It doesn't pay to be soft. . . . Well, there's your remuda, Jeff. At least you won't be afoot when you work the Box X range."

Jeff sized up the saddle horses and pack mules. The fifteen or twenty Mexican vaqueros had heard the news and were talking together excitedly. Some of them were singing little snatches of ranchero songs as they roped horses and mules for shoeing.

"I'd like to get this straight." Jeff turned to the girl. "I bought this Box X, and I'm hiring Zack Taylor to ramrod it. I'm glad you told me about Cliff Wilder's end of the game—it helps me figure out what I have to do and how to tackle the job. I intend making it very touch for Wilder and his cattle thieves if they come over on my range. You don't have to be born and raised in the West to know how to fight. In short, I'm one pilgrim sucker that won't take a whipping layin' down."

"Three cheers, Jeff. And good luck. You'll need it." Jean Taylor looked sideways at him from under the brim of her battered old Stetson. She was smiling at him, perhaps laughing at him. A wave of anger swept him suddenly as he realized how damned ridiculous he must look in his new store boots and hat and too-new Levi overalls. Then the feeling was gone, leaving him cold.

"From where I sit," he told Zack Taylor's daughter, "it looks like you're playing both ends against the middle. If I wipe out Wilder and his renegades and make it, then ask you to marry me, will you take me up on it?"

Jean Taylor's eyes crinkled. "*Como no?*" she said. "At least, I'd think about it, Jeff."

Abruptly Jeff swung down from the fence and walked off, leaving Jean sitting there.

CHAPTER FIVE

Wild Man Wilder

AT the end of eight months Jefferson Davis Jones was ramrodding the Box X outfit himself and doing a damned good job of it for a greenhorn pilgrim. Or for a real cowhand, as far as that went. Once he learned the range and how to work the rough country, he made a top hand wherever Uncle Zack Taylor put him.

"You don't need me no more than you'd need another arm, Jeff," Uncle Zack told him one day. "But where did you learn to punch cows?"

"Texas," Jeff answered. "I was born on a cow ranch, Uncle Zack. My father had left me a little ranch with some good mares and a stud, and that's about all. Then I got to playin' polo with the millionaires. Polo was a new college sport and I paid my way through school teachin' polo and sellin' ponies. Finally I sold my little two-bit ranch in Texas and forgot to go back to the cow country—where I belonged. . . .

"I got a bank job," he went on. "It gave me a society front. Well, I finished up inside Sing Sing Prison, and when I got out I was licked. That is, until I met Emmett Greely. Now I'm back in the cow country to stay. That's the size of it, Zack."

"You don't need me no more, son."

"The hell I don't! We haven't sawed off Cliff Wilder's horns yet."

"Got to ketch a mav'rick *orejano* before you kin saw his long horns," said Zack dryly. "And so far he ain't showed hide 'er hair."

"Wilder is coming back, Zack. You can gamble on it." And Jeff grinned, his eyes glinting. He weighed now one hundred and eighty-five stripped, and every pound of it was bone and hard muscle. His skin was weathered and tanned, and his straw-colored hair looked crisp and alive again. He had never been more physically fit than he was now, living on pinto beans and jerky and dutch oven bread and sleeping out under the stars. He loved it.

A show-down with Cliff Wilder was coming—that was as certain as that the sky was blue. Wilder had managed to send him word that when the sign was right he was coming back to claim what he said belonged to him. And Jefferson Davis Jones knew what Cliff Wilder meant. Wilder meant not only the Box X outfit Em Greely had gotten away from Felix Floyd. He was also referring to a girl named Jean Taylor.

Jeff had seen Jean no more than three or

four times during the past eight months and those brief meetings had been strained. Jeff had had his guard up, and Jean had been friendly, but reserved.

When they shipped at Mesquite Springs, Jeff saw Em Greely. Em by now had a new printing outfit, but his Oracle was still published at irregular intervals only. Em Greely was as happy, he told Jeff, as any man could be. They drank together at the Last Chance with Terry McCaffrey, and later wound up at the Half-Mile House where Jeff's Mexican vaqueros, dressed in their town clothes and barbered to the nines, spent the night dancing with Erin's little señoritas. Em Greely and Erin and Jeff sat at a table near the bar and talked. Uncle Zack stayed at the Last Chance to swap lies with Terry McCaffrey.

"Em wants me to go back on the stage," Erin told Jeff. "But I won't go. He refuses to believe I'm happy here. That's why the darned fool won't ask me to marry him."

JEFF had most of the story, now. Terry McCaffrey had been tied up with the crooked political ring in San Francisco—the ring Emmett Greely had smashed with his newspaper. Terry had been hired to kill Em Greely, but had balked at murder. So they'd framed Terry McCaffrey, too, had hung a murder charge on him and sent him to San Quentin. A rival newspaper had branded Erin Shannon as Erin McCaffrey, daughter of the notorious ex-prize fighter and Barbary Coast saloon-keeper, "Terrible Terry" McCaffrey. That notoriety had smashed Erin's career as an opera singer. Then Em Greely had taken up the fight for her with his newspaper, and the rival paper had twisted that staunch loyalty into an ugly maligning relationship. Em Greely had lost his head, then. He had walked into the Nob Hill mansion of the millionaire who owned the rival paper and killed that man with his two bare hands. And the Law had sent Emmett Greely to San Quentin prison. . . . Erin Shannon McCaffrey had somehow gotten her father and Emmett Greely pardoned. Em Greely had caught a freight train and landed here in the desert. Erin had managed to trail him, and had nursed him back to life. And Terry had gone into the saloon business here, while Erin had opened the Half-Mile House.

Widower Zack Taylor had let go his hold on life when his wife died. Erin had taken care of his growing daughter, Jean. Zack Taylor had been on one of his heavy sprees when Cliff Wilder had pokered him out of his Box X outfit at the Last Chance. Terry McCaffrey had refused to throw in with Wilder on the fleecing of the drunken cattleman, had tried to stop the poker game. But Zack Taylor had pulled a gun and threatened to kill the big saloon-keeper if he didn't stay back behind his bar where he belonged. Terry had salvaged the Palo Verde home ranch and the remuda of good horses and mules. And when Uncle Zack sobered up, Terry sent him out to the Palo Verde with a jug. He'd told him to live there as long as he had need. And Erin had sent Jean off to boarding school. Jean had run away from school, finally, and had come back to the Palo Verde Ranch where she had been born. For all the world, Zack had said later, like a horse will come back to where it was foaled.

Nobody had been able to stop Jean Taylor from seeing Cliff Wilder. At dances, the spur-jingling Box X ramrod claimed her for every waltz. Cliff Wilder was big and handsome and had a way with women and Jean was of age. Over twenty-one, she told her father and Erin and Em Greely when they had tried to break up what had the brand and earmarks of being a romance. But because she was what Zack called "hackamore broke," they let her have her head. They'd been afraid to yank her up with a spade-bit for fear she'd run away and marry Wilder.

Jeff wouldn't let himself think too much about Jean Taylor, and for most of those eight months he had been too dog-tired at night to lie awake on the ground in his tarp-covered bed and dream about her.

He'd had one bitter lesson—from the most beautiful girl he had ever known or ever would know, the charming, polished daughter of one of New York's biggest bankers. Until the stock market crash, Jeff had been headlong in love with Alicia and they were engaged to be married. Then the banker father had called Jefferson Davis Jones, cashier at the bank, into his private office. The banker's handsome face was gray as granite and there was a pearl-handled .38 on his polished mahogany desk.

"It's that way out, Jefferson," he said, picking up the gun. "Unless I can trust you."

The banker needed someone like this young cashier to take the rap for his theft. He had used bank money to play the market, an old, old story. The insurance company would stand the financial loss—if Jefferson Davis Jones, bank cashier, would plead guilty to the theft. That would leave the banker father of Alicia with a clean slate. And he would get Jeff pardoned as soon as possible. Then Alicia would be waiting, waiting for him at the prison gates. . . .

Jefferson Davis Jones, four-goal polo player, a Texas ranch-raised kid gone high society, was in love. So headlong in love he would have made any sacrifice for his Alicia.

But when the time came, Alicia had not been waiting at the prison gates. She had married the brilliant attorney who had so cleverly and smoothly handled the case for her father that no hint of the crime had ever been associated

with the banker's proud name. There had been that check for fifty thousand dollars—and finally a pardon that had barely beat a prison death for Jefferson Davis Jones, Texan.

Alicia had been all the women in the world wrapped up in one beautiful package—and the memory of her was bitter as gall. . . .

ZACK TAYLOR had ridden to town to order cattle cars and Jeff was camped at the upper ranch with his round-up crew when Jean Taylor rode up out of the moonlight, her horse all but foundered.

Her face looked chalk-white in the moonlight, her boyish grin was twisted and bitter.

"You win, Jeff," she said. "I just got what they gave Felix Floyd. Wilder shot father at Mesquite Springs last night. He's still in town, gunning for you."

Jeff's lean, tanned face whitened a little around the corners of his mouth. Jean was leaning across her saddle horn as if she was sick. Jeff reached up and slid an arm around her waist and she went limp in his arms as he lifted her down. Her flannel blouse was torn and there were some ugly looking bruises on her face. Her voice came from behind set teeth.

"I was a little too smart for my britches, Jeff. Cliff Wilder don't like bein' played for a sucker. He rassles rough—damn him!"

The Mexican cook made her a cup of strong black round-up coffee and Jeff had her drink it. After that he unrolled his tarp-covered bed and pawed through his warsack until he found a filled cartridge belt with a six-shooter in an old holster. There was a tight, lopsided grin on his face as he buckled on the gun. Jean watched him in silence from where she sat cross-legged on the ground by the campfire, her eyes bright with anxiety. In her old brush-scarred chaps and faded denim jumper she looked like a kid who had over-matched himself in a fight, but hated to admit he was licked.

Jeff had had his brief moment of elation over the girl's defeat, but it was gone in a few brief seconds. Then something else stirred in him in spite of all his efforts to stifle it. You didn't kick somebody when they were down, he half-excused his softness.

"Take it easy, Jean," he told her. "The boys here won't let you get hurt."

Jean gulped down the last of the coffee, tossed the empty cup in the dishpan and got to her feet.

"Just one thing, Jeff," she said, "before you hit the trail. I want you to get it straight about Cliff Wilder and me. He's always been marked bad in my book. Wilder stole the Box X from my dad. I was out to scalp him, from the start. Wilder played a marked-card game to cold-deck dad out of his Box X outfit. I was fighting to get that outfit back—because I was the cause of dad's losing it. You see, Cliff Wilder threatened me. He said if I didn't marry him he'd take the Box X away from my father and make me beg on my knees to get it back. I thought he was running a whizzer so I slapped his face and laughed at him.

"Cliff Wilder wasn't bluffing," she went on earnestly. "He made good his threat about getting the Box X outfit, but I wouldn't crawl to him. I flirted along with him but always managed to keep out of reach of his pawing. I used a woman's weapons, and Erin coached me along. But I always packed a little .32 pocket gun and was ready to use it. Yes, I'd have married him—but I'd made up my mind to kill him before he touched me. A widow get's her dead husband's estate. And that was my game, Jeff, till you rode up.

"Even then I held that only as a hole card. Cliff Wilder is tough as a boot, and you didn't look tough enough to lick him at his own cattle rustling, gun slinging game. So I made a show of spreading my cards face-up for you that first day. I didn't want either of us to be fooled. I wonder if you understand that, Jeff?"

"I think I savvy, Jean." He had both hands on her shoulders. And he was smiling as he stooped and gently kissed her.

"Thanks, Jeff. I told a lie that day. I said I'd marry you to get back the Box X outfit. That was a lie."

"But you will marry me," Jeff told her stubbornly.

"Let me finish my story, Jeff. . . . I figured Wilder was dangerous, that he'd be dangerous as long as he lived. And I knew he'd come back. So I kept in touch with him by mail, figuring he'd tell me when to expect him back. I talked it over with Erin and Em Greely and Terry McCaffrey, so they'd be ready for Wilder when they rode back to Mesquite Springs. Well, they had the wolf trap set last night. Even Wong Pong and Italian Jack had guns and their places barricaded. And Em Greely had quietly fetched in a deputy sheriff or an Arizona Ranger from somewhere. So they weren't exactly napping when Wilder rode into town with his renegades.

"BUT Wilder was playin' it foxy," she went on. "He wrote me to meet him at the Half-Mile House. The Law was there at the Half-Mile House, bushed up and waiting. Em Greely and Terry McCaffrey, the Chinaman and Italian Jack were there too. And when a dozen or more night riders charged up out of the dark, they got shot up. The deputy sheriff was the only man on our side who got it. He was killed."

"And Cliff Wilder?" asked Jeff, softly.

"Wilder coyoted. If he was with his rene-

gades, nobody saw him. Cliff Wilder was in Mesquite Springs when my dad rode into town. And Wilder shot dad down in the dark.

"Dad couldn't see where the shot came from. He didn't know how many more bushwhackers might be hidden out there. He was badly wounded. But he hung onto his saddle horn till his horse got him to the Half-Mile House. The ruckus there was over, by then. Dad has a fighting chance to live. Erin is a wonderful nurse. And he—he says a fightin' chance is all he wants."

"How did you get mauled around?"

"I had just saddled a horse and hit the trail. Somebody had to get word to you that Wilder was on the prowl. Well, Wilder stopped me. He accused me of double-crossing him and setting the trap. I didn't deny it, and when he grabbed me I tried to shoot him. He took my pistol away. We were both on horseback. I made his horse pitch, and Wilder was caught off balance and bucked off. That's how I made my get-away. I was riding away when he yelled after me to tell you he'd be waiting at Mesquite Springs—if you had the guts to shoot it out man to man with him."

"I hope," grinned Jeff, "Wilder is there when I get there."

"Don't go there alone, Jeff! Please! Turn your herd loose and take every man you've got. These Mexicans can fight. You can't ride alone into a bushwhacker trap!"

"I fight for what I claim, Jean, and right now I'm claiming you. This is strictly a one-man job."

"Then I'm going with you," Jean Taylor announced firmly. "No, don't give me any argument, Jeff. If you leave me behind, I'll trail you. And if Wilder shoots you, I'll kill him from the brush. Believe that, Jeff. I'm playin' for keeps, too."

No one ever argued with Jean Taylor when she had that look in her dark eyes, that tight-lipped expression on her tanned face.

"You see, Jeff," she said quietly, "I love you. With all my heart and soul and body. For me you're the first and last and only man on earth."

She told him that slowly, in a low-toned, level voice; but her dark eyes were shining and then she was in his arms and the icy, aching lump in Jeff's heart was melted and gone forever.

"I was going to tell you something, once," he told her as they rode away from camp on fresh horses. "Then I changed my mind. I reckon I'd better get it off my chest now. It's about a girl I almost married."

So Jeff told her about Alicia and the fifty thousand dollars. She let him get it off his chest, then told him Em Greely had told her all about it last night, while they were waiting at the Half-Mile House to spring the trap.

"I'd like to claw her eyes out, Jeff," Jean Taylor declared vehemently. "I fight for what I claim too, Jeff!"

CHAPTER SIX

Motto for Heroes!

MESQUITE SPRINGS was as deserted-looking in the moonlight as some abandoned ghost town. The desert night held the hush of death. The dusty street was empty. Doors were shut and barred, windows dark. The only light showed dimly behind drawn blinds at the little depot, where the station agent worked his night shift.

Cliff Wilder waited there in the dark Last Chance Saloon, with a saddle carbine and a six-shooter and a half emptied bottle of whiskey. His saddled horse was tied out back in the black shadows, ready for a get-away. The big renegade was no coward, but he had a wolf's cunning. He had sent his renegades to the Half-Mile House last night, and they had sprung the wolf trap set for Cliff Wilder. He felt lucky and would ride his luck now by killing this Jefferson Davis Jones.

He'd shot old Uncle Zack Taylor and he still had a bullet with Em Greely's name on it, and another marked for Terry McCaffrey. After that he'd ride into Mexico and hide out. Later he could come back with a hand-picked renegade outfit and take over the Box X again. But he'd take Jean Taylor to Mexico with him. That little she-wildcat would tame down fast enough. And that high-chinned Erin woman would get hurt if she got in his way. Wilder had never killed a woman, but he could if he had to and never lose any sleep over it. What the hell! A tough cowhand played his string out. And right now he was all set to cut down that damned pilgrim who had cheated him out of the Box X.

Cliff Wilder took another drink. This damned waiting was the toughest part of a job like this. . . . Wilder corked the bottle finally, and gripped his saddle gun. That had sounded like a horsebacker coming up out of the night. . . .

Jefferson Davis Jones rode alone. He had left Jean Taylor back at the Half-Mile House. Jeff hadn't paused there—he had simply kissed Jean goodbye and left her. He would come back, he had told her confidently. Strangely, he believed that.

Jean and Em Greely had delt him and Uncle Zack Taylor out when they had set their wolf trap. Because, Jean had finally admitted to Jeff, she didn't want her father and the man she loved to get killed. And Em had agreed that Uncle Zack had taken enough punishment and that Jeff deserved his chance to enjoy happiness. They'd trapped the lobo wolves,

but the big curly wolf had smelled the trap and kept away. And Uncle Zack had gotten shot. So it looked now as if the job was up to Jefferson Davis Jones, anyhow. And Em had told Jean that Jeff wouldn't want it otherwise. Jeff was man enough to fight his own battle.

So Jeff rode alone, his hand on his gun. He had never used a gun on a man, and he wondered how scared he'd be at the show-down. Or would he get the fighting chance ever to know? Wilder was a bushwhacker gun fighter. . . .

Jeff was almost at the edge of town when a man on horseback rode wide around and past him, spurring hard. There was something vaguely familiar about the tall man bent low along the neck of his hard-running horse, but Jeff let the rider go on unchallenged. He was not more than a hundred yards behind when the man slid his horse to a halt at the hitch-rack in front of the Last Chance Saloon. There was a gun in the man's hand as he swung from his saddle.

From inside the dark saloon came the crashing, room-trapped roar of a gun. The man at the hitchrack stumbled and reeled drunkenly. The six-shooter in his hand spewed flame, and the gun inside the saloon answered viciously. Then through the echoing din of gunfire sounded a nasal stream of profanity. It was the voice of Felix Floyd. And he kept up his wild cursing until his voice choked off in a death rattle.

Then Cliff Wilder stepped out through the swinging half doors of the Last Chance, a smoking six-shooter in his hand.

"That'll learn you to trail me, you sneakin' copperhead!" Cliff Wilder snarled. Then Wilder looked up, and saw Jeff riding at him. Jeff's horse slid to a halt in a heavy swirl of dust and Cliff Wilder's six-shooter spat flame. Stirrups flopping, the spooked bronc stampeded down the street. Then Jefferson Davis Jones stood there in the settling dust, his long legs braced, the six-shooter in his hand bucking and blazing.

WILDER caught the first bullet in the shoulder and it staggered him. Wilder's next shot went wild, and Wilder had his close-up then of the man he'd sworn to kill—no longer a pale-faced, skinny dude, but a broad-shouldered, lean-jawed fighting cowpuncher. His white teeth bared in a flat-lipped grin, he jerked his gun trigger again. But the dude owner of the Box X outfit was shooting to kill and now Cliff Wilder knew that—knew it a split second before the next heavy .45 slug tore through his ribs and smashed his heart.

The former Box X ramrod's next bullet tore into the dust and the heavy recoil kicked the gun from his hand. Then Cliff Wilder went down, slowly, lazily, almost like a tired man lying down for a long sleep. And for Cliff Wilder, this was a long sleep—the longest that ever comes to a man. . . .

Jefferson Davis Jones had come out of that swift, brief gun fight without a scratch. It was over, over and done with almost before Jeff had time to realize it. And he was still standing there, dazedly, the six-shooter in his hand smoky-hot, when Jean Taylor rode up out of the shadows and landed on her feet beside him. She had a Colt gripped in her hand, and her face was pale as marble.

"I heard the shots, Jeff," she panted. "Are you all right? Are you hit?"

Jeff took the big .45 six-shooter from the girl's hand, and flung it away. "I'm scared as hell," he told her, "but that's about all."

Then he took her in his arms. After a time he caught his horse and they rode back together to the Half-Mile House. Jean let out a wild yipping shout and lights showed inside suddenly. Then the front door opened and Em Greely stood there in the lighted doorway, his moon face pallid, his grin stiff-lipped. Erin stood behind him, and both of them had guns.

Then seeing Jeff and Jean both safe, they tossed their guns aside and hauled the two inside. Terry McCaffrey put down a long-barreled rifle and grinned as he solemnly shook hands with Jeff.

"You see anything of that Felix Floyd?" growled the saloon-keeper.

Jeff said: "Felix Floyd saved my life. He drew Wilder's gunfire—got him outside where he had to fight in the open. Where'd Floyd come from, anyhow? What took him to town?"

"Money." Em Greely's color was back now, and he grinned widely. "Felix Floyd and Cliff Wilder were pardners in crime, Jeff. Wilder had Floyd's money—the money he'd stolen from Felix when they beat him up for not grabbing the Box X. So Felix Floyd has been trailing him, waiting for the chance to get back his dough. And was willing to kill to get it. . . .

"When Felix Floyd stopped by the Half-Mile House, we held him here till you and Jean showed up. After you'd ridden on, I told him Wilder was in town and that if he wanted that money Wilder packed, he'd better beat you there, because it would be finders-keepers if you killed Wilder. You see, I gambled on Felix Floyd's greed getting the better of his cowardice. Then I turned him loose, and Felix played it just the way I figured."

"Somebody better take a look at Wilder's carcass," remarked Terry. "Well, I'd better get back to town and open up the Last Chance."

"Dad!" There was a hidden laughter in Erin's voice. "This isn't the Barbary Coast!"

"Hell, we'll use Wilder's money to build a

schoolhouse," grinned Terry. "Them kids of Italian Jack's is growin' to where they'll need schoolin' soon. "And ain't I the main gaffer on the school board?"

Uncle Zack Taylor's voice creaked as he hobbled in with a heavy cane, favoring his wounded leg. The bullet had ripped his thigh, but he was going to be all right, the doc had told him. He gripped Jeff's hand hard. Jeff's left arm was around Jean's shoulders, and tears dimmed the cowman's puckered eyes as he got out the words, finally.

"You'll do, son," he said. "You'll do to ride the river with."

LATER on Em Greely got Jeff aside and showed him a month-old copy of a New York newspaper. It contained an account of a train wreck and listed the passengers killed: A prominent New York banker, his daughter Alicia, Alicia's husband, a noted attorney. . . .

"That closes that chapter of your book, Jeff." And Em Greely took the newspaper out to the kitchen and shoved it into the hot coals of the cook stove.

Wong Pong, in a snowy apron and chef's cap, watched the tiny blaze it made, his brown eyes shining. "All light, Emmy?" he asked.

"All right, Wong Pong."

"Flied quail?" the Chinaman beamed.

"Fried quail," beamed Em Greely.

"You betcha!" said Wong Pong and went back to his cooking.

Italian Jack had put away a rifle and six-shooter and butcher knife and was preparing to herd his buxom wife and brood of wide-eyed youngsters back to town.

"I'll be around as usual," beamed Em, "to get the works, Jack." "You bringa Jeff," grinned the barber. "He needa da haircut, da shave, he needa da works, too!" Jeff reflectively massaged the stubble of whiskers on his lean jaw and smilingly agreed.

A week later Jean Taylor married Jefferson Davis Jones. And then, because somebody said double weddings were bad luck, Erin and Emmett Greely were made man and wife in a separate ceremony. Erin told the padre to stick around, however, because the way it looked to her there was going to be an epidemic of weddings in Mesquite Springs. A lot of the Box X vaqueros and Erin's señoritas seemed to have paired off for keeps.

Emmett Greely got out a special edition of his Mesquite Springs Oracle. His editorial on the Law coming to the cow town of Mesquite Springs was a masterpiece. There was a stack of congratulatory letters and telegrams from bigtime newspaper publishers waiting for him when the four of them got back from a wedding trip to the Grand Canyon. Half a dozen of the country's biggest newspapers wanted him for Editor. The great Em Greely, one of them called him. Em's eyes misted over there in his little Oracle office.

Nor was Em Greely the only one to be dug up out of oblivion, dusted off, and put on a new pedestal for a fickle public to worship. They had also rediscovered Erin Shannon, and were clamoring for her return. There were some mighty flattering offers from producers wanting to star beautiful Erin Shannon in their latest productions.

"Well, Em," grinned Jeff, "There it is! The world at your feet—and at Erin's."

Em Greely smiled back at him and put a single question. "Would *you* go back now, Jeff?"

"What a hell of a question to ask a man!" said Jefferson Davis Jones.

Em Greely wiped the printer's ink from his hands on the office towel and suggested they all adjourn to the Last Chance Saloon.

Out on the street, they all paused for a long moment, admiring the new sign above the door of the Mesquite Springs Oracle. Burned deep into the wood by a branding iron, the new motto—Horace Greeley's immortal words—had a special meaning for all of them. The sign said simply: "GO WEST!"

THE END

WELCOME, KILLER!

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

The barrel of the gun chopped down between the bars.

The Rattlesnake Kid could peddle anything from bullets to books, but there were some folks, he discovered, who could only learn from a text written in flaming lead!

PALO PEYTON did not like this weather. Condemned to an easy life, he wanted it easy. Perhaps this was so because he had ridden enough hard roads, just for the devil of it, to grow weary of them. However it was, he did not like cutting blindly through this windy wet night with no sure haven ahead.

Until three years ago, Palo Peyton had always known where he was riding. Often it was with the relay of horses the Wild Bunch kept stationed from Montana to the Rio Grande border. He had seen his likeness on post office bulletin boards from Jackson Hole to the Big Bend, offering rewards, often, as big as those posted for Harvey Logan and

Butch Cassidy and others of that tough breed.

He had scorned a holster, carrying his swift gun, unsheathed, in the waistband of his pants. And he had made the reckless name of the Rattlesnake Kid anathema to a hundred officers of county law. But that was done, now. He had found a new way of life.

This new trail was the result of a rifle slug an alert posseman had put between his shoulders, and which had come close to costing him his life. A doctor had finally cheated that bullet of its due. But it had been a hard thing to face when the doctor had told him he was done with long-riders' trails, that his one way back to health lay in living in the open, but at an easy pace.

Palo Peyton knew his own nature too well to think he could work light chores on a cattle spread, or even an easy job in a grass country town, without something coming up which would start him packing his gun again and giving himself away with it. He knew the sheriffs of many counties too well to hope he could ride across their domains at his old trade without them putting an eager hand on him for one last time.

There had been only one answer. There had to be some work to which he could turn which would feed him, keep him in the healthful open, and provide him with a disguise against recognition, all at the same time. The "Little Wonder Books of Information" had provided the answer. Thus Palo Peyton became a peddler of books.

He learned to grin cheerfully when a door slammed in his face or an irate farmer aired his opinion of a claybelly son who peddled learning from door to door and took up a man's good time. For the most part he worked the country roads and the mountain trails, taking the disdain of those he met with unvarying good humor. For always there was the thought of how these men would look, could some secret voice suddenly reveal the identity of this pleasant-faced peddler whom they abused so freely. The Rattlesnake Kid had vanished, but his name was still remembered.

In time, Palo Peyton found satisfaction in his new trade. A man earned little folding money, peddling books, but he got by. It was an easy life, with few problems, and it didn't anchor a fellow to one spot. The restlessness of a drifter, the eternal thirst for new vistas, grew in Palo Peyton, pulling at him more strongly than it ever had in the most reckless days of the Rattlesnake Kid.

It was only on nights like this, with a chill wind driving rain from the dark, unfriendly hills and he sat a wet saddle with his poncho over his book-laden saddlebags that Peyton was not satisfied with his drifting. It was only on nights like this that he had thoughts of chimney smoke and good tight fences and sleek cattle running to a man's own brand. On such nights his roots reached strongly toward the ground underfoot. Tonight the spell of this was strong on him.

FOR two days Peyton had not done well. This was chiefly mining country into which he had drifted; craggy, mountainous and inaccessible. Miners cared even less than farmers and stock hands for the questionable values of the *Little Wonder Dictionary*, the *Little Wonder Digest of Great Men's Lives*, and the *Little Wonder Museum of Strange Beasts on The Land And in The Sea*. His only hope for a sale lay in canvassing the scattered homesteads of stubborn farmers and shoestring stockmen who were trying to pry a living from the stony soil. For this reason, he had avoided the town which lay over the ridges somewhere, even after the storm had rolled down from higher hills.

Dark had come and he had cursed his luck and the barrenness of the shallow valleys. Then this light had appeared ahead. As he approached it, he had seen fat stock tail-to-wind in a fence corner. He had seen fence wire, and, a little later, lamp-lighted windows. Here was haven, for sure, and probably a meal. And, with a rainy night in which to talk, maybe a sale. With his saddlebags tossed over his shoulder, he swung down from his horse and knocked at the door. A woman's voice sang out, challenging and unfriendly: "Who is it?"

Rain was running down Peyton's back. He was in no mood for the effort, but he glibly rattled off the speech the Little Wonder people had prepared to open doors for their salesmen: "A gift of the gods, Ma'am! A key to unlock wonders for young and old, brought to you by a—"

A man swore beyond the door. There was a pause, and then a sound of hurried movements. Presently the door parted a crack and a girl looked out at him. At another time and place Peyton would have thought the face attractive, although too plain to warrant special interest. Certainly the Rattlesnake Kid would not have noticed it on the street of a cow town. However, he was aware of the attraction, now, and the character in the girl's face seemed more welcome than mere beauty. Peyton decided this might be because he was hungry.

The girl's unfriendliness, and some other tension Peyton could not identify ran out of her face, quick sympathy replacing it. Peyton realized he must be making a forlorn figure in the eaves-drip. The door opened wider.

"Come in," the girl said. "You must be soaked to the bone."

As he came through the doorway, dropping his saddlebags against the wall beside the opening, she spoke over her shoulder.

"It's all right, John," she said, "you can come out. It's only a stranger—no Kebow man. Put his horse away."

A man appeared in a doorway across the room—a young man with an embittered face and an odd tension in his movements. He carried a gun, and crossed the room to step out into the night without any acknowledgement to Peyton. The girl pulled a chair around from the table to the stove and offered it to Palo with a gesture. He dropped into it, shed his shoes, and gratefully raised his feet to the fender rail and the warmth of the big, wood-burning stove.

"HUNGRY?" the girl asked him, and Peyton looked at her. His look was enough, and she smiled a little. The man came back from outside, his hair dampened from the rain.

"They won't ride on a night like this, John," the girl said. "It's a bluff. If you'll get a little more wood in from the shed I'll heat a skillet. Somebody ought to eat around here tonight!"

The man scowled and turned back into the weather. After a time, he returned with an armload of wood and dumped it into the stove-box. Crossing to Peyton's saddlebags, he thrust at them with his toe till their contents were revealed. He seemed relieved.

"A peddler!" he muttered, half to himself. "Even Kebow wouldn't think of that!" Then, to Peyton: "See a bunch of riders anywhere this afternoon or tonight?"

Peyton shook his head. The man moved to a row of hooks and took down a mackinaw coat and a battered Stetson.

"They won't come in this weather—" the girl began again, but Peyton saw that she was not convinced by her own statement.

"Sue, Kebow'd send his boys through hell to get me!" The man spoke bitterly. "I've got to go. Looks like Willow Creek ran bad luck for us, instead of good!"

The girl nodded somberly as she followed the man to the door.

"Get off the main road the minute you're through the pass, John," she whispered vehemently. "Keep clear till you're out of Kebow's reach."

The man nodded and pulled open the door. "I hate like the devil to run!" he growled.

"Even a catamount'll run afore it'll sit and get shot!" the girl answered gently. "I'll be all right—all the better for knowing you're in the clear. You'd better go, now."

Without another word, the man plunged into the night. A moment later Peyton heard him ride past the house, and because such sounds had once been important to the Rattlesnake Kid, he knew the man rode a heavy animal, far better suited to a wagon or a plow than an escape into the night.

When the man was gone, Peyton would have questioned the girl, but curiosity which might have been healthy in the old days could do nothing but invite trouble, now. The girl busied herself at the stove.

HALF an hour later, when steaming food had been set before him and Peyton had shoveled some of its warmth into him, he looked up to find the girl watching him with speculative eyes.

"You'd handle a rope better than those books," she said suddenly, with a sharp tilt of her head towards the saddlebags beside the door.

"Reckon you're right," Palo Peyton agreed non-committally.

"You'd be a man to fight if he was stepped on," the girl continued thoughtfully, but Peyton shook his head at that.

"Peddlers don't get stepped on, they get kicked," he told her curtly. "You've figured me wrong, Miss."

The girl straightened slowly. "Maybe," she said, and the speculation was still in her eyes. "I reckon I'd better tell you about John. He's my brother—"

The girl spoke dispassionately. It was a familiar story, one which Peyton had heard many times before. John Crane and his sister had come into this valley, had liked it, and had homesteaded the acreage allotted by law. The homestead had been filed in Sue Crane's name to make title easy for her should her brother die. They had worked hard, courted no neighbors, and avoided the rough mining town over the ridges. What trading they carried on was done after a long ride to the junction at the lower end of the valley.

Then, early in the spring, John Crane had found color on Willow Creek, the small stream which watered their pasture. He had ridden away and filed a mineral patent, this time in his own name, to conform with the law. But his efforts at secrecy had failed. Sam Kebow, mine owner and promoter with headquarters in the town across the ridges, had learned of the color and had tried to buy both the mineral claim and the homestead. Refused, he had tried bluff, then had threatened reprisals.

Early this evening a miner who helped the Cranes at odd times with their stock had ridden breathlessly in from town. Kebow had given him walking papers—told him to get out of the country or lose his hair. Before the miner left town, he knew he was being banished because of his friendship for the Cranes. Kebow's trap was set to spring.

The paymaster for one of Kebow's remote mines had been killed and Kebow swore the man had been robbed of his payroll cash. Kebow also swore the man had identified John Crane, the homesteader nobody in town knew,

as his murderer. Under pressure from Kebow the sheriff in town had appointed a Kebow foreman deputy and authorized him to take to the hills with Kebow's hands as a posse. They were coming after John Crane.

IT WAS from this frame-up that Sue Crane's brother was running. Peyton felt sympathy for the homesteader, also a vague concern. He knew that escape from this valley could only be through the pass, far up the ridges. Mounted as he was, Crane would need a healthy start to make it to that pass ahead of pursuit. Peyton felt sorry for the girl who had spun out this yarn. Her face was set and her eyes steady, but he could tell she was scared to death. He also felt a little sorry for himself—the Rattlesnake Kid who was no longer allowed to rattle the way he had once.

But on second thought he *wasn't* the Rattlesnake Kid—not any more. Trouble was no dish for him now. He looked at the girl and wished he could make her understand how it was with him.

"There's plenty of skunks still left in these hills," he remarked.

"And plenty of tumbleweeds, when the wind blows!" she answered tersely.

Peyton knew this was meant for him. There were nettles in her voice, and a kind of justice in her charge. But she had not pegged him right. She was making a mistake. He was no mere drifter who rolled with the wind just for fear of standing against it. He rolled only because it was easier than sitting still and finding root. Still, he did roll, and she was right about him to that extent. He was beginning to wonder whether she would cut at him again, whether she expected something of a stranger merely because she had fed him, when hoofbeats sounded outside the cabin. Leather creaked, then impatient fists beat at the door.

"Who is it?" Sue Crane asked steadily.

"The law!"

"What do you want?"

"John Crane, a killer!" came the brusque answer. "Open this door or we'll smash it down!"

The girl's lips trembled, but she was not afraid. Peyton saw that. It was just that she had hoped so desperately that this would not happen—and now it had.

There was a lengthening silence, then heavy shoulders crashed against the door. Palo Peyton, safe as a peddler of books, intended just to sit here and show his sympathy, nothing more. Yet now he was remembering how John Craig had delayed his departure to stable Peyton's horse and bring in wood for Peyton's supper. He also was remembering that Peyton had ridden away on an ordinary work horse and couldn't make the pass to safety, unless—

Suddenly he shoved out of his chair, crossed to the door. He opened it and saw two men.

"You want what?" he asked the heavy-set man who stood nearest, scowling.

The man reached out his hand and grabbed Peyton's shoulders. Another stepped around and clamped steel cuffs to one of Peyton's wrists.

The heavy-set man growled: "You're wanted for a neck-dance, Crane—as quick as court can set tomorrow!"

"You've got me wrong," Peyton said softly. "I'm a peddler, Peyton by name. But his tone didn't sound convincing.

The man roughly dragged Peyton outside. Peyton loudly demanded his saddlebags of books and one of the posseman laughed skeptically and brought them out. They mounted him on a led horse and tied his feet together under the animal's belly. Then, as they reined away from the house, Peyton thought he saw Sue Crane slip out the doorway, wrapped in a short coat, and head down toward the corral. He was puzzled, but said nothing.

Pleased that their chore was done, the posse turned toward the ridges and the town beyond them, satisfaction showing on every face.

PALO PEYTON had this figured. He'd let this posse haul him into town. He'd sleep in a jail bed. And in the morning, after John Crane had had ample time to clear the pass and get out of the valley, he'd identify himself. It wouldn't be hard. Sam Kebow would come over for a look at the fish he'd caught in his trap, and Kebow knew Crane—he'd see his mistake. Likely he'd be sore as hell, but what could he do? He wanted Crane, and only Crane. He'd have to see that the peddler his men had taken by mistake was turned free.

There'd be a stir in town over the mistake, and maybe he, Peyton, could utilize the limelight to whip up interest in a couple of "Little Wonder" sales. At worst, it could cost him nothing and he would have repaid Sue Crane for her hospitality. He might even have shown her, by then, that even a tumbleweed could do another man a turn when the sign was right.

He had not, however, figured on how completely Sam Kebow dominated the town across the ridges. He was taken to Kebow's office in a building at the lower end of town, not to the jail. There he was shoved into a room where Kebow sat over whiskey and cards, waiting impatiently. He listened impassively as Kebow lashed out at his deputy and the posse. "You lunk-headed fools have muffed this!" the big, bull-voiced promoter drove at them angrily. "Now I've got to pull it out of the fire. Olson got his regular bottle?"

The foreman nodded, looking down self-consciously at his big deputy's star.

"I took it over myself as usual, before we

left, Sam. He'll be loaded proper by now."

Kebow smiled thinly. "All right, and Judge Amos knows they's a trial, come mornin'?"

"That's set, too."

Kebow chuckled without humor. "Well, I guess this'll be all right, then. Take this damned peddler across to Sheriff Olson and tell him he's John Crane. Crane's out of our hands, but he'll likely turn back after a couple of weeks. We'll keep a couple of men at the pass and a couple at the junction, waiting for him. We'll plow him under, then. Meanwhile, we'll hang this peddler tomorrow as Crane. And later tonight, when the town's quiet, I'll take some of the boys out to the Crane place. We'll take care of the girl—make it look like she packed up and lit out when her brother was arrested. With the place deserted and the brother supposedly hanged, preempting that claim won't be any trick at all. Get it?"

Servile smiles gave Kebow his answer. Then the burly promoter lifted his hand in a gesture of dismissal and Peyton was shoved out of the door.

This was bad, not as he had planned it at all, Peyton reflected as he was hauled along the street. He thought of Sue Crane and wondered if she had ridden away. If she had not, she was in grave danger. He thought also of his own extreme peril. He had expected release in the morning. He would get, instead, a quick noose on order of a prejudiced court. He knew Sam Kebow's kind too well to question either the man's intent or his ability to manage things as he had promised. It would have been a deep hole for the Rattlesnake Kid; it was bottomless for Palo Peyton, the obscure book peddler.

Sheriff Olson, shag-bearded and hollow-eyed, was in a loose-jointed mood, as Kebow's foreman had promised. He unlocked a cell for his new prisoner, bandied words with Peyton's captors, then lingered in the corridor after they had left to stare owlishly through the grating.

"Another killer, eh?" he muttered. "And a thief, too. Or do you claim to be innocent, like all the rest of 'em?"

This looked like the thinnest of straws, but Peyton eagerly seized it.

"I am!" he said earnestly.

The sheriff nodded. "Matter of fact, I reckon you've been framed—you ain't John Crane, that's certain. You're a driftin' son and a plain plumb stranger to these parts?"

Peyton seized the bars, astonished. "That's right!" he agreed tersely. "But how do you—"

THE sheriff cut him off with a grunt of annoyance. "Why, you poor locoed fool," he barked, "I been hearin' gents with a slick gun peddle that yarn for thirty years! I may have taken a nip against the rain tonight, but Pete Olson ain't drunk enough to be took in that way! I just pried that out'n you so's you could get it off your chest and I wouldn't have to come back and listen to it later. Now look, I'm takin' a snooze up front. Wake me and you'll get no breakfast!" And with a truculent shake of the head, the sheriff started to turn away.

Palo Peyton abruptly kicked open the saddlebags beside his cot and scooped up two of the books which tumbled out. He thrust his thumb between two pages of the "Little Wonder Museum of Strange Beasts On The Land And In The Sea." With his back to the door, he flipped back the cover of the "Little Wonder Dictionary" and lifted out the six-gun which lay in a carefully hollowed space between pages of Webster's wisdom. He thrust the Little Wonder Museum, open, toward the sheriff.

"I can show you proof of who I am," he said swiftly. "Look!"

His choice of the page in the Little Wonder Museum had been deliberate. The sheriff found himself staring at a curvaceous mermaid, who beamed from the lithograph with a provocative smile. The sheriff bent closer to the grill. His head was a little down, his eyes wholly on the picture, when the barrel of the gun chopped down expertly between the bars. The lawman sighed heavily and went down. Peyton swiftly snagged his keys and unlocked the door.

Then, replacing the books in his saddlebags, he whipped a bandana from his pocket, knotted it about the lower half of his face, and adjusted his sodden Stetson to a new and rakish angle. Finally, with his gun thrust into the waistband of his pants in the old, familiar position, he stepped into the corridor and walked out of the jail.

The streets were virtually deserted. Three or four good horses stood hitched at the rack of the Hot Poker Saloon, up the street. Any one of them, provided the cinches on the others were cut, was a fair guarantee of escape from Sam Kebow's hangnoose frame-up. As a peddler up to his ears in something that didn't concern him, Peyton knew he should hit leather and ride. But for some reason he found himself still thinking of the girl who had cooked his supper and scornfully called him a tumbleweed. And suddenly risks seemed unimportant if he could save her from Kebow's sinister designs.

Kebow was not in the headquarters building to which Peyton had first been taken, and the peddler felt a spurt of fear. Maybe the promoter had already started for the girl's homestead! Then he thought of the Hot Poker and turned back to it. He heard Kebow's voice while he was still outside, on the walk. He kicked open the door, saw startled faces.

Only Kebow's flabby-jowled face remained expressionless. Peyton knew that this man would not be fooled by his mask, and neither would his deputy there beside him.

"Set easy, gents!" Peyton snapped. "I'm looking for a pair of snakes."

"Snakes—!" somebody breathed, and heads swivelled toward Sam Kebow and his foreman. Another voice, off in the crowd, exclaimed: "Look at that belt gun—no leather! Ain't that the way the Rattlesnake Kid used to—"

"That's right, brother," Peyton answered curtly. "You're lookin' at the Kid right now. And I'm lookin' for a fat-bellied son and a gent with a tin star. They jumped the claim of a friend of mine and figured to hang an innocent man for something he didn't do."

The crowd in the room stood tensed as Peytons glance held rigidly on Kebow and the deputy. Then Peyton started towards them.

He had to take a half dozen steps before the deputy broke, making a frantic lunge for his weapon. An instant behind him, using the deputy's movement as a screen for his own, Sam Kebow's hand flashed down. Peyton was boxed. He jerked his gun free and fired. The deputy staggered back as Peyton swung his gun to Kebow. But Kebow was ready now.

His slug was like a mallet against Peyton's ribs but it didn't stop the action of his finger on his own Colt. His first shot hit Kebow in the thigh. His second, following instantly, spun the big man around and dropped him.

With no awareness of how badly he was hit himself, Peyton calmly blew the smoke from his piece and shoved the iron back under his belt. Then he turned his back on the crowd in the saloon and hurried towards the jail.

STEPPING over Sheriff Olson's sprawled body, Peyton coolly locked himself back in his cell, reached out to return the keys to Olson's pocket, and was flattened inconspicuously back against the wall in a corner when Olson revived, climbed wildly to his feet, and lumbered angrily down the hall after a dazed glance through the grating.

"Escape!" the sheriff roared. "Turn out the town, a killer's loose! Where's Kebow!"

Olsons shouts faded. Then, from outside, came an excited medley of voices. Finally the front door of the jail grated open and Olson led a group of men down the corridor.

"No doubt of it!" he raged. "A damned book peddler, turnin' out to be the Rattlesnake Kid! Poor Sam! But we'll get the son!"

The sheriff's mouth abruptly fell open as Peyton stepped to the gate of the cell. Townsmen pressed close and looked in.

One of them clapped the old man on the shoulder. "You sure dream fancy, Amos!" he jeered. "Kebow's whiskey, maybe. Look, now, this gent was locked up as being John Crane, a killer. Like as not there wasn't nobody killed, there ain't no John Crane, and this son's what he looks to be—a book peddler."

Sheriff Olson eyed Peyton truculently.

"Going to turn me loose, Sheriff?"

"Maybe," Olson snarled, "if I can figure a peaceable way a half-fish woman in a picture book could have busted my head all by herself!" And he wheeled and walked off.

Looking up the corridor, Peyton saw the front door open as Olson sank weakly into his chair. A woman came through the door, rain dripping from her coat and forming a little puddle on the floor. The short shotgun cradled in her arms brought Olson to his feet.

"What the tarnation—?" he exclaimed.

"Give me those keys!" Sue Crane snapped.

Olson flung the keys onto his desk, hurled the whiskey bottle beside him to splinters against the wall, and stalked wildly into the night. Sue Crane unlocked Peyton's door and they came back to the office.

"I reckon you rode my horse in?" he asked, and the girl nodded.

"I'm obliged, then, Ma'am. I'll be going out over the pass, and if I see your brother I'll tell him you could do with him back here."

The girl looked at Peyton and smiled. "You're obliged!" she mimicked. "What about me? With Kebow dead—"

"Thank the Rattlesnake Kid, Ma'am."

The girl's smile widened. "That's what I'm trying to do," she said, and handed him a worn dodger bearing his picture. "It was in the cabin," Sue Crane said. "You dropped it."

Peyton eyed her wet clothes and the shotgun with sudden awareness. "You were afraid Kebow or Olson would find out, too," he said quietly. "So you came in here to rescue me."

The girl's smile almost made her look beautiful, Peyton was thinking. She told him: "With the claim clear, John will turn miner. I'll need help with our stock—"

Peyton dumped his saddlebags, and then, dipping the sheriff's pen in ink, he scratched a brief note:

I owe you a night's lodging. I'm short of cash, so take these. A book beats a bottle, any day. Remember that.

The Rattlesnake Kid

Straightening, then, he turned to the girl. "You'll probably need help with some fences."

"Yes." Sue Crane smiled again. "Preferably some that would stop a tumbleweed."

Palo Peyton grinned. A drifting peddler and the shadow of an outlaw were now as finally dead as Sam Kebow and his tin-star deputy. Where this girl was, the land would be good. A trail had ended where he had intended only to spend the night.

The Circle B Pays Off In Hell

When young Garry Landers' trail partner was brutally murdered, Garry either had to line his sights on that mysterious powdersmoke paymaster, or see each man of his beef-crew paid off in the same bloodstained coin. . . . With a $10,000 bushwhack bonus reserved for himself—payable on demand!

CHAPTER ONE

Payoff at Overland

IN ALL his twenty-three years, Garry Landers had never seen so much money at one time. He had known mostly coins, big cart-wheel dollars, halves and bits. But here were impressive sheaves of green and yellow bills, with fine, intricate printing on them—altogether ten thousand dollars worth!

The man called Klaffke, buyer of the trail-herd, dealt the bills out in little stacks as though they were decks of cards, so many of each kind.

He sat at one side of the table in the back room at the Hotel Silver Buffalo, and the Benson Circle B trail-crew of five men, with Chuck Wheeler in the center, stared from the other side in awesome silence. The glasses and the bottle of good whiskey at Klaffke's right hand were completely ignored.

It occurred to Garry, sitting at the end of the table, that he had never before actually

Action-Packed Trail-Town Novelette

★ By VAN CORT ★

The marshal jerked Garry's gun from its holster.

considered in terms of money . . . tens, twenties, fifties. . . . And you didn't have to herd bills. With bills like that, you didn't have to sleep out nights in rain and wind, or ride for miles in the scorching heat. You could just stick them in your pockets and have them handy. . . . To do with as you pleased.

"Eight thousand, five hundred and fifty," counted Klaffke in a dry, heavy voice. "Eight thousand six hundred, seven hundred, eight hundred, nine hundred, nine thousand. Right?"

Garry forced his eyes from the money and took in the sight of his four trail partners as their glances hypnotically followed Klaffke's deft handling of the bills. Chuck Wheeler's slim figure was stooped slightly as if he were counting beef from his saddle; his lips protruded a bit, but his eyes were narrowed. He was a tight-built, saddle-hardened and trail-wise rider in his late thirties.

Beyond that, Garry suddenly reflected, you never knew much about a man: what he really was thinking, planning, dreaming. It struck him queerly at that moment that somehow these men were no longer a crew, but five individuals, each with his own distinct personality and separate thoughts. The reflection surprised him.

Lee and Bert sat on either side of Chuck;

they were only slightly older than Garry—Lee tall, with a constant grin which now appeared frozen as he stared at the money, Bert shorter, heavier, his russet hair sticking out from under his hat, his thick lips slightly open. Bert's eyes seemed alight, as if with thoughts of the three months' pay he would get shortly.

Carson, dark, handsome, lean of frame, sat at the other end of the table, but he did not lean forward, impressed, like the others; his lips were tight and his expression told nothing, as if he were sitting in at a poker game. For all you could tell, he might not care a hoot in hell about money at all.

"Eight hundred fifty, nine hundred," Klaffke counted on monotonously. "Nine hundred fifty, ten thousand. That right?"

Garry breathed a sigh of relief. He was suddenly sick of all this money and the tension that seemed to result from it. Chuck Wheeler said nothing, just nodded. Klaffe stacked the bills in neat wads of five hundred dollars each. "Put them that way in your envelopes," he directed. "You'll have twenty envelopes that way, and know just where you are."

Chuck looked slightly annoyed at the suggestion. He quickly stuffed the wads in the covers, then made two bunches of them and tied a piece of string around each before he stuck them in the side pockets of his coat. Garry noticed that the foreman's hands trembled slightly.

Klaffke, a friend of Brant Benson, whose cattle he had just bought, said, "You're not going to carry it like that, are you?"

Chuck looked up sharply, provoked. His horny forefinger picked up, by the trigger guard, the .38 Colt which lay on the table beside him. He flicked it into his hand with a neat double spin. "I'll carry it all right, Mr. Klaffke."

Klaffke smoothed his face and put his own pistol into its armpit holster before he reached for the whiskey bottle. None of them had known, Garry realized, that Chuck could do that neat double spin. You wouldn't expect a man like Chuck Wheeler to be able to do a thing like that.

They all stood up now and had two drinks apiece before Chuck and Klaffke solemnly shook hands across the table to seal the bargain. Then the five men walked out of the hotel in a tight bunch.

THERE were no banks and no railroads where they came from. Brant Benson's ranch was an outpost. The money would have to be carried back.

Overland was a wide open town and it roared and called to them as they passed by the saloons and dance halls and gambling houses on their way out. The hitch rails were packed, though it was early in the forenoon, and the laughter of girls and rattle of glasses and voices drifted out from the bars. Somewhere a tinny piano was being pounded.

Bert was grinning with anticipation. "Some town!" he said, and there was an exultant note in his voice. To him, Overland, overflowing with boisterous merry-makers from cattle, mining and lumber booms, was the ultimate in metropolitan achievement. They passed Ryder's Emporium and through the windows caught a glimpse of an immense room filled with crowded poker, faro and dice tables. The soft, intense murmur of voices and click of coins and chips hit Garry with a strange impact; the place, ironically, had the solemnity of a church.

"This is a high-stake town," remarked Carson, his dark face showing a pleased smile. He had been here before and felt at home. "They make an' break fortunes at those tables," he went on. "To some of those hombres in there, Chuck, what you got in your pockets would be nothing but spending money."

Chuck Wheeler cast a quick glance at him but said nothing.

At the corner of Fortune and Sunset they passed the town marshal and one of his deputies. The marshal was a gaunt, mustached man in his forties, wearing what looked like a train conductor's cap, and a brace of six shooters on the outside of his coat. His pale, roving eyes took in the little bunch of men with suspicion. He was hired, not so much to enforce law and order as to keep the town reasonably regulated and peaceful, so that the various businesses, legitimate and otherwise, could go on undisturbed and people would not be afraid to come here to spend their money.

As the five men tramped onto the gallery at Cleary's saloon a single shot turned them as one. They saw a rider topple from his horse in the roadway outside the Silver Buffalo, roll and jerk once convulsively in the thick dust, and then lay still.

At once traffic stopped, and people backed against the houses, waiting, tensed, to see what would happen next. The dead man's horse, for he was unmistakably dead, moved uneasily around, sniffing the air nervously. Finally the animal came to a halt ten yards away, near a bunch of hitched mounts. Nothing else happened. In the distance sounded the waning muffled thunder of hoofbeats.

The suddenness of the thing took Garry's breath; it somehow angered him, too. "Who the hell did that?" he demanded, and stepped off the gallery as the crowd began closing in on the victim. Someone lifted, then let fall back into the dust a completely limp arm. "The dirty potshooter," he muttered.

The marshal and his deputy had began walk-

ing calmly toward the spot. Chuck Wheeler's hand grasped Garry's shoulder, turning him around. "Come on," he said, jerking his head toward Cleary's. "It ain't none of our business. Leave it go. We got our accounting to do."

Lee and Bert had hesitated with Garry, Bert's eyes going round and wide. Carson stood at the entrance to Cleary's. "Happens all the time here," he said carelessly. "It's nothing special. You got to watch yourself in this man's town, that's all."

"Come on," said Chuck again.

By now the crowd had closed in on the dead man and nothing could be seen. Garry finally shrugged and followed the others into the saloon, climbing the narrow backstairs with them and barging into the room he and Chuck occupied.

CHAPTER TWO

Bushwhack Lead!

WITH the door closed and the four men sitting expectantly on the two beds, Chuck cleared the basin and pitcher off the small table and placed it in the middle of the room. He took one of the packages from his pocket and began dealing out four stacks of pay. Each man had a hundred and twenty dollars coming, plus a fifteen-dollar bonus. Lee and Burt were the first ones to leave the room. "We'll see you when we're broke," they grinned, and clattered down the stairs, hungry for their fling. Chuck Wheeler looked after them and winced. "Hard come, easy go," he grunted.

Carson was still standing over the pay table, stuffing his money into the inner pocket of his coat; he was a neater dresser than any of them. "Too damned hard," he said. "There ain't much fun in spending hard-come money."

His tone made both Chuck and Garry look up at him. They knew little about him; he had only been with the Benson outfit for six months. Chuck had all the envelopes laid out before him and was counting the money again for his own satisfaction. He had as yet not taken out his own pay. "What about yours?" asked Carson suddenly. "Ain't you taking your pay out?" His eyes swept the bills hungrily.

"Never mind about that," said Chuck. "I've got the money, ain't I? I'll get mine."

Suddenly Carson laid both hands down on the many stacks of bills. "I want to touch it," he said, gathering up the neat stacks carefully and leafing them without bringing disorder to them. "Touch it for luck. I aim to increase that scrawny chicken feed of mine before I

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get through with this danged he-man's town."

He put the money down again while the others watched him.

"A little game?" said Chuck.

Carson nodded. "This is a high-stake town. Sometimes the luck runs mighty fast here. They have some high power games at Ryder's. I seen a man make twenty thousand in one sitting there once."

"Twenty thousand's a bit high," said Chuck, his mouth slightly open. He licked his lips and swallowed, and Garry saw his protruding Adam's apple bob up and down in the folds of his leathery neck.

"It ain't unusual at all," said Carson, touching the money in his pocket. "This should give me luck. I'll get in a little game now an' pretend I have a ten thousand dollar stake in back of me. Touchin' that much money works like that . . ."

Garry wished they would stop talking about money; that Chuck would put it away. He was sick of seeing this wealth on the table; it give him a creeping uneasiness. At the same time he was wondering who had killed that man down in the street, and why—wondered if the man had any folks, and where they were.

". . . Never heard that one," said Chuck. "Is that a fact?"

"It's a fact, all right. I've seen it work—once in Sacramento, and another time down at Tombstone . . ." Carson was at the door now. "You want to sit in a little game any time, Chuck, I'll be down to Ryder's. If you don't see me around, ask Carrie Emerson for me."

Chuck had his hand on his gun laying on the table. "Close that door, Carson; yes, I'll remember." Someone was going by outside as Carson stepped out.

Garry sat down on the bed and watched Chuck take a money belt from his saddlebag. He began filling it, keeping one of the full envelopes out for his own pocket. "You gonna carry it like that?" Garry asked, as the wiry little foreman unbuttoned his two shirts and fastened the belt onto his midriff. "There's an Overland stage depot at the other end of town. They got a safe."

"I don't trust nobody," said Chuck. Then he grinned. "Did you hear that Klaffke askin' me if I was gonna carry it in my pockets? Damn fool; he acted like it was still his." He patted his solid waistline. "Maybe there's something to what Carson says about keepin' your touch on it. We'll see."

AT LAST the money was all out of sight. Garry stood by the window, gazing down at the town below, wondering what it would have to offer him. He was hungry for something, but he did not know what. A slender girl came out of a store and got into a buggy and drove away in it. Garry followed her with his glance till she finally was out of sight, his thoughts running strangely. From where he was she had looked very beautiful, and somehow, unreal.

"Well, son, how about some eats?" Chuck was bent over the wash basin, his short mustaches and long forelock dripping with soapy water as he reached for the towel. "I'm hungry."

Garry wheeled slowly into the room. "Chuck," he said suddenly, earnestly, "who do you figger monkeyed with Brant's latigo, so he couldn't trail-herd along with us?"

The little man turned sharply on Garry, the towel revealing his half-opened mouth, his abruptly rounded eyes. "It was monkeyed with, was it?"

Garry nodded. "That's the way I figgered it, but I could be wrong. Looked to me like somebody whittled down that latigo with a knife and sandpaper and then greased it to cover up. It was done right by the stitches; neat job too . . ."

The foreman's face had a blank look. "H'mmm," he said slowly.

Between them was the picture of Brant Benson mounting Golddust, his favorite buckskin, and careening all over the yard, taking the bucks out of him, the ready trail crew watching in envy. Then it had happened; Benson had flown over the head of his mount and had broken one of the corral bars in the process. They picked him up in a blanket and sent for the doctor. When he came to in his bed he had regretfully had to tell Chuck Wheeler to take charge of the trail-herd and bring it to Overland without him. The money was badly needed.

Now Chuck Wheeler's eyes narrowed slowly. "How-come you didn't say nothin' 'bout this afore?" he asked.

Garry shrugged uncomfortably. "I dunno; figured mebbe I could be wrong, I guess. Besides, I don't like to mess in other people's business."

The little man considered that for a moment. He acted, somehow, as if his dignity as trail-boss had been offended; it had already been given a prod when Klaffke had expressed concern about his carrying the money. Now he said, "Mebbe you could still be wrong. Come on, let's eat."

They walked back to the Silver Buffalo and ordered steaks and a rare thing, green vegetables, washing the food down with great slugs of beer and finishing the meal off with apple pie and fresh milk instead of coffee. But it turned out to be a quiet meal, with the little foreman sitting stiff and taciturn as he wrapped himself around his food. The two of them had ridden together for a year and a half now, yet suddenly there seemed nothing for them to talk about. They knew each other as

well as men who live a purely physical life can, but there had never been any great exchange of thoughts between them.

As he cleaned the last of his pie from the plate, Garry said: "Guess I didn't mention it before, Chuck, but I ain't figuring on trailing back to Lazy B with you."

Wheeler wiped milk from his mustache with the back of his hand, his look suddenly sharp, birdlike. "Full of surprises today, ain't you?" he grunted.

IT SEEMED to Garry that Chuck seemed annoyed again, as if he meant: If you're leaving, why did you bother about Brant's latigo anyway? Something queer was in the air, but Garry had no sure knowledge what it could be.

"You don't like ridin for Benson?" Wheeler pressed. "Best danged outfit *I* ever rode with," and there was obvious annoyance in the foreman's tone at this prospect of losing a good rider.

"It ain't that, Chuck. . . ." The roar of the town came through the window to Garry, and as he gazed up the street he kept thinking about the girl in the buggy. A restlessness stirred in him. "Summer's comin' on. I figger on driftin' north, up Montana way. Never seen Montana."

"Driftin', huh?" Chuck Wheeler said it with insinuation in his tone.

"Got tired o' ridin' the same trail all the time," Garry said.

Wheeler was working a toothpick. He said suddenly through busy fingers: "Who do *you* think fixed that latigo?"

"That's the funny part of it. I couldn't say." That was true; none of the men seemed the kind to do a thing like that.

"If you're aimin' to quit, Garry," Chuck Wheeler said, "this ain't a too nice send-off."

Garry felt the resentment in the other's tone and he was almost sorry he had got the little foreman worrying; but he was convinced now that someone had monkeyed with that latigo, and it was partly because he was leaving the outfit that he had mentioned it. Somebody ought to know. "Mebbe I should have kept my big mouth shut," he suggested.

Chuck got up. "Well, you use your own judgment."

As they went out the door, a roar from the end of the hotel gallery turned them in their tracks. "Hay, you scaliwags! Where you been all this time?"

It was Bert, his face red, his legs floundering, drunker than a magpie. He staggered toward them, hatless, smiling stupidly, his glance indirect and unfocused. "I bet he ain't got a bit left," Chuck murmured.

Bert slapped them both on the shoulders, then stopped grinning as he saw their expressions. He said gravely to Chuck, "Lend me some money, will you?"

Chuck Wheeler spat, cursed briefly. "Nothin' doin'. Where's your pay?"

Bert was sobering; he shrugged. "What's the difference? Had a few drinks, met a nice little gal. Then my luck went against me in a game of jackpot."

"Same old story," said Chuck disgustedly. "When you gonna learn to stay away from two-bit honky-tonk gals when you gamble? Set-ups, that's all they are."

Bert lurched against the foreman, insistent. "Aw, come on, Chuck, let me have some foldin' money! What the hell, you got a pocketful. I want to change my luck."

"What kind of talk is that?" Chuck Wheeler glanced uneasily at the passers-by. "You know this dinero ain't mine."

"You'll get it back."

"You're wastin' your breath, Bert." And Wheeler suddenly spun on his heel and walked away.

Bert looked sullenly after him. "Cocky little runt," he grumbled. "All I wanted was a small stake."

In a way Garry felt sorry for him. Bert was a good trail partner, but money burned holes in his pockets, and in town he was a babe in the woods, completely lost. He never learned. Garry dug into his jeans and brought out a ten dollar bill. "Drink it up slow," he said. "Get it over with and sleep it off."

Bert took the money. "You're a pal. This'll change my luck."

"Where you at?"

"Emerson's Emporium. Come on over if you feel like it. Place is full of damn nice lookers."

GARRY shook his head. "Reckon not; later maybe." He watched Bert steer an uncertain course across the street. Then the name, Emerson, suddenly struck him. It was Carrie Emerson at Ryder's that Chuck was supposed to ask for if he didn't see Carson. Garry vaguely wondered if there was any connection between the two names.

"It's a nice day, mister . . ."

A smooth, friendly town-dressed man had stopped and was smiling at him. "It is," Garry agreed guardedly, studying the smoke from his cigarette.

"Wouldn't care to sit in a little game, would you?"

"Guess not . . ."

"It's an all right game," said the man, with sudden offended petulance. "Had nothing to do an' thought I'd look up a couple of partners for a nice little friendly game, that's all. Anything you say—stud, jackpot, whist."

"Guess I just ain't a gamblin' man," Garry said, "but thanks just the same." And he wheeled and moved on.

"All right, all right," grated the gambler, from behind him. "This ain't no town for prayer meetin's, though!"

Garry wondered about taking offense but thought better of it. It suddenly struck him that somehow all five of them who had brought that ten thousand dollar herd to town were now split up and separated. There seemed something wrong about that. He knew where none of them, except Bert, were. The money was not exactly his responsibility, but he had helped bring those cattle to rail-head and he somehow wanted to see Chuck and the others safely on their way back with that ten thousand.

On a sudden impulse he headed toward Emerson's Emporium to see what Bert was doing; Bert, who never learned anything. . . . He speculated briefly on what the ultimate fate of a man like Bert would be. Forever working, forever drunk, forever broke.

On the way he decided to cut through a back alley, cluttered with refuse and boxes, fetid with the odors from chicken coops and outhouses. He was nearing Sunset when a hidden rat hole unexpectedly caved in under his foot, tripping him.

At that moment something thudded into wood just above his head and he gazed dumbfoundedly at a splintered gash the bullet had made in the clapboards. He had not even been aware of the report of the weapon.

Pistol in hand, he crouched against the closed door of a stable, listening to the roar of the town from either end of the alley, hearing his own heartbeat above it. No second shot came, nor any further sound.

Wiping the sweat from his face, Garry slowly worked the door open and edged into the semi-darkness of the stable. He stood for a moment, trying to collect himself, remembering Carson's warning words about this town and seeing in his mind's eye the lone rider who had toppled from his saddle in the middle of the street.

Though he waited for a couple of minutes behind the crack of the door the alley outside remained dead in the fetid sunshine. He turned, then, and walked hastily through the stable and out into the street, mingling with the heavy traffic on the boardwalk. The invisible death which had nearly caught up with him made his hand jumpy and he was suddenly furiously wishing that someone he could see would take a shot at him.

CHAPTER THREE

Who Fired That Shot?

HIS heart was pounding too fast for comfort as he walked down the street and crossed to Emerson's Emporium. He barged through the fancy, stained-glass swing doors, the confusion of the place all at once hitting him like the impact of a wave and stirring a faint excitement in him.

In front there were the gaming tables for roulette, faro and dice, all crowded three deep; toward the rear, a dance floor, swirled with dust from many booted feet and behind that an enormous bar reached across the full width of the room. Six bartenders manned this long stretch of mahogany, and as soon as one customer stepped away from it, his place was immediately taken by another. Overseers sat on high chairs along either side of the room and girls walked constantly among the tables, directing customers to vacant game places or to drinking tables on either side of the dance floor.

There was a mad, confused, yet somehow purposeful movement through the whole huge room. For Overland, this was quite a place. Garry stood inside the door till a girl came up to him and greeted him with an easy familiarity. "What can I do for you, mister?" she smiled.

He stared curiously down at the girl. "Just lookin' for my partner," he said, and described Bert.

The girl laughed. "Forget about your partner; let's have a drink, cowboy."

His hand closed hard about her wrist. "My partner; where is he?"

"He got too drunk; they put him out in the alley to sleep it off. Come on, cowboy, be a little friendly."

"Where? Garry demanded impatiently.

She made a resentful gesture toward a side door at the left end of the bar and he turned his back on her and made his way through the mob at the game tables.

From the side door he had to walk a few yards deeper into the alley before he saw Bert sitting asleep against the wall next to a stack of empty whiskey barrels. It was queerly still here; a shaft of sunlight knifed down between the false fronts and hit Bert across the face; flies buzzed about irritatingly. Then Garry's heart stood completely still, and he leaped forward. Bert, the noisy snorer, was not snoring. "Bert!" Garry cried. "Bert!"

The arm he shook was flabby; the head lolled inertly onto the shoulder and slowly, sickeningly, the body that had been Bert's sank sideways into the dirt, the small, blood-stained hole over his heart suddenly becoming visible.

Garry ran back through the side door, his eyes wild, his six-shooter flashing up from his hip. His trigger finger jerked twice, punching bullets into the ceiling, the double report exploding with an ear-shattering, room-trapped violence.

That stopped them. Heads looked up, fin-

gers lifted from piano keys; hands full of coins and chips held startledly on the man in the side door; a girl screamed. Then the big room was abruptly still.

"Who killed my partner?" Garry's voice shook with fury. He jerked his thumb back over his shoulder. "He's out there in the alley. Come on, answer me! Who killed him?"

IN THE lull the nearest bartender lifted a Greener quietly from under the mahogany and laid it across the bar, the twin barrels staring straight at Garry. Two oversized bouncers began sidling up on either side of him.

"What's all the trouble, cowboy?" they asked thinly.

Garry slowly re-holstered his Colt; he fought to control his voice. Presently he pointed to the girl to whom he had spoken before. "You said they put him outside," he said to her. "*Who* did?"

She began crying, unexpectedly. "Bill and Jack there . . ." She pointed to the bouncers. "God! And I'd just been drinking with him." Her voice broke. The bouncers surged out into the alley ahead of the crowd. "He was alive when we took him out," one of them muttered. "He was noisy. But he fell asleep when we set him against the barrels . . ."

Garry, standing tensed amidst the panting mob, suddenly thought again: *Who cut Brant Benson's cinch down to the breaking point? And who fixed that latigo?*

The town marshal came through the crowd, glanced down at the dead body and immediately picked out two men who quickly covered the corpse with a tablecloth and carried it away.

It was done swiftly, smoothly and with a businesslike dispatch which staggered Garry. In a few minutes the officer had shooed most of the crowd back inside, and Emerson's was quickly going full blast again. Garry stood with spinning head and watched Bert's legs disappear around the back alley corner. His heart was still rammed up against his throat. "Oh, bury me not . . ." had always been Bert's favorite song. He had howled it, off key, on many an occasion while on night herd.

Now it would not be the lone prairie, but the Overland boothill that would be Bert's last resting place. And Bert had no folks to be notified. Garry felt hollow, sick, suddenly.

The marshal came over and jerked Garry's gun from its holster while the two bouncers and the girl looked on. He broke the weapon, looked at the two spent shells, then inquisitively, at Garry.

Garry explained the two shots and the others corroborated him. The marshal's pale blue eyes went coldly, impersonally, over Garry. "You could have replaced the third shell," he said. "Nobody in there heard the shot that killed him."

The lawman ejected all the cartridges and sniffed the chambers. "All right, only two," he said, and handed the six shooter back. "Any idea who done it?"

Garry swallowed, his face muscles tightened. "Nary a one."

The man kept eyeing him with an odd, cool suspicion. "I seen you hombres come into town; I seen you walk down the street . . ." He pointed a long, bony finger at Garry's chest as he got ready to walk away. "You keep your troubles out of Overland; be the healthiest thing you could do. We aim to keep an orderly an' peaceful town here."

Garry gasped for breath as he stared at the disappearing back of the officer. He could find no word to answer him.

THE two bouncers had gone back inside to resume their job; but the girl was still in the alley. "Better come in an' have a drink, cowboy," she said.

Garry followed her back inside and she got a small space for them at the end of the bar. They both had a straight drink, and he said: "Did you see anybody with him?"

The girl shook her head; her voice was

still thick, the paint on her face streaked with her tears. "He was a nice kind of a fool," she said. "Wasn't no harm in him."

Garry studied the girl's sad eyes, the hard painted face. "See anybody kind o' watchin' or lookin' at him?" he demanded.

Again she gave the silent negative. Then suddenly she held out a small wad of bills toward him. "It's his—I rolled it off him when he was kissin' me. Take it; I don't want it."

Garry said slowly, "Keep it; I guess it's no good to him now."

"No," she said, with a little shudder, "it's dead man's money. But at least it'll bury him decent. Take it." and she pushed it back into his hand.

Despite the turmoil in Garry's mind, he couldn't help but think how this girl might have looked in a nice kitchen, and without that paint and lipstick. He paid for the drinks and turned to go. "Got work to do," he muttered in a preoccupied way.

A few feet from the bar the girl caught his elbow. "If I could ever help you," she said hesitantly, "I have a room over Tolson's bakery on Spring. I wouldn't tell that to everybody. So long, cowboy. Ask for Marjory Weaver."

Garry nodded absently and went out. *She's nothing but a dance hall girl,* he thought; *but her eyes were nice, they didn't seem to belong in that face.*

He moved up Sunset and hurried across each alleyway, his pulses now steadier, though faster than normal. The marshal's last remark still bothered him. So it was *their* trouble, not Overland's. There were just the four of them now, and but for sheer dumb luck with that rat hole, there might only have been three. He'd have to find Chuck and tell him. Maybe he could stop in at Ryder's and ask for Carson; Carson would know where Chuck was.

He stopped suddenly at a corner. Maybe he ought to find Lee first. He'd ridden a lot with Lee. Lee was easy-going, a steady, quiet drinker. He could carry his liquor, too, and never went wild, like Bert had. He might be in some little place now, drinking; he never gambled.

That meant he'd have to look through this town in every small bar. Meanwhile, he was at a loss what to do. Then, being only a block from Cleary's, he decided to go up to the room and see if Chuck might be there.

CHAPTER FOUR

Murder Stampede!

NONE of the crew was in the bar and he went up the rickety stairs fast, taking the key from his pocket. He did not need it; the door stood ajar. *That's peculiar,* he thought, and a little shiver ran through him.

His mouth felt tight and dry as he stepped cautiously into the semi-dark room. Someone had pulled down the shade and drawn the dark brown curtains across the window. He walked over, nervous as a cat, and let in the light. Then he saw it.

Both beds had been stripped of their covernings, the mattresses and pillows slit in several places. The belongings of himself and Chuck were scattered all over the room: drawers has been pulled out of the dresser; the back of the mirror was torn off; the cheap little rug on the floor rolled up. Even a loose floor board has been investigated, with a knife.

Now he'd *have* to find Chuck, Garry thought with dismay.

Then the thought struck him that someone might have overheard them talking about the money—someone, unknown to any of them, ruthlessly bent on cutting them down, one by one, till he found out which of the five carried those greenbacks.

Coming out on the landing he was stopped in his tracks by the sight of Lee entering Cleary's bar downstairs. The tall cowpuncher had a girl with him, and his face looked drawn and tight. Moving tensely, he went to the bar and procured two drinks which he brought back to the small round table where he had seated the girl. She was not of the dance hall variety, but looked as if she might work in a store or restaurant and now was having a day off. She seemed genuinely interested in Lee, though she, also, seemed tense about something.

And now, as Garry stared down at the one man of the crew he thought he should know best, a sickening doubt assailed him. Did he really know Lee at all? What did he know, actually, but the fact that here was a good-natured, a capable cowhand, and a fast shot with a pistol? That ten thousand dollars, somehow, seemed to have changed everything.

His hailing call to Lee died on his lips, and suddenly an idea came to him. Lee and the girl finished their drink quickly, then Lee stood up, grave and purposeful. He patted the girl's hand. "Wait here," he said, and moved toward the stairway.

Garry shrank back into the darkness of the corridor, his heart pounding. Lee was going up to get his things! He was ready to blow the town with this girl! Garry thought suddenly of Bert as he had lain back there in the alley, and a cold fear swept over him as he wondered where Chuck could be.

As Lee reached the landing and turned into the corridor Garry called softly, "Lee!"

The tall man jumped and sucked in his breath sharply. "Who's that!" Then he saw

Garry and said queerly, "Oh! It's you, Garry."

The door to the room where Lee and Bert and Carson were supposed to bunk was nearest, and Garry swung inside. "Come in, Lee," he said. "I want to ask you something."

He closed the door behind them as Lee crossed the room, his lips moving to speak. But Garry spoke first, his eyes hanging on the other's every move.

"I was just talking to Bert, Lee. Over to—"

Lee's jaw jutted out, his eyes narrowing. "You were? Where?"

Garry tried to make his voice casual. "Why, just a couple minutes ago, over by the Silver Buffalo where Klaffke paid off."

The trick worked—almost too well. Garry had hoped he was wrong, and that slowed his timing; he had not expected Lee's lightning reaction. Lee's pistol leaped from its holster.

"So you thought you'd pull a trick on me," Lee snarled. "Well, it won't work, see? I don't fool that easy, hombre." There was a mad light in the cowboy's eyes, a look Garry had never seen there before.

"Lee," said Garry, fighting to keep control of his voice, "put that gun down, and get some sense into your head. Let's talk this over quietly."

It was a startling sensation, this facing a man he had ridden with and liked, now turned into a potential murderer with death poised to strike in his gun-filled hand. The light was waning outside; the room was getting dark. Garry judged the distance from his boot toe Lee's pistol hand. He held Lee's glance.

LEE grated, "We'll see who—" and then Garry's foot swept up.

The gun flew from Lee's hand as Garry's fist thudded into the tall puncher's midriff, knocking the wind from him. Then they were on the floor, rolling, clawing for each other's throats, hitting furiously, blindly, when they could. Suddenly Garry's right caught Lee's exposed temple; he hit savagely, again and again. Lee's head snapped back and struck the iron leg of the bed. Then suddenly he lay still.

Garry got shakily to his knees. He found the string to Bert's war bag, lashed Lee's hands securely behind his back, pressed a rolled bandanna between his teeth and knotted it hard in back of the man's neck. Then he shoved him under the bed, brushed himself off, and walked downstairs and out into the street.

He avoided the girl, deciding that if she was implicated, the town authorities would have taken care of her. Right now he wanted to find Chuck. As he headed for Ryder's, he tried to make sense of Lee's actions, and failed. Why would Lee want to kill him and Bert when it was Chuck who had the money? Or didn't Lee know for sure that Chuck carried it? Maybe that was it; maybe that was why the room had come to be ransacked. Yet, queerly, that theory didn't quite seem to fit all the facts, either.

The moment he entered Ryder's he spied Carson in a corner of the room, seated at a far table. As he approached he saw that Carson looked pale and nervous. The puncher's eyes were dilated, and sweat stood out on his forehead.

He looked up quickly as Garry came over, now suddenly filled with fresh doubts. "What you doin' here?" he demanded with a weak laugh. "Bringin' me luck?"

Garry said, "I want to talk to you. Seen Chuck any place?"

Carson shook his head, keeping his eyes on the dealer. "Ain't had time." He waved a bill. "Touch me for luck, Garry, this is my last ten. I was up to a thousand, once. I'm due for a change."

Garry studied him. "Touch me," Carson repeated, insistently. "I been here all afternoon; you gotta bring me luck."

He was about to play his ten when Garry seized him roughly by the shoulder and drew him up from the table. "Come outside," he said harshly. "You can toss that last ten away later."

Carson saw his expression and followed him. "Damn it," he complained, "that ten thousand never brought me any luck, nohow. After I won that thousand, I began to lose right and left." And he cursed desperately.

They were outside at the end of the gallery, now, gathered up in the swift, oncoming darkness. Garry said curtly, "Forget the money. Bert is dead—murdered. I think Lee did it. Haven't you seen Chuck anywheres?"

He saw the impact of the words on Carson. The puncher drew a steadying breath. What's that, what's that? Man, you say Bert —that Lee—"

Garry told him everything and Carson stared at him, aghast. "I wouldn't have believed it of Lee," he muttered finally. "It don't make no sense." He scratched his head thoughtfully. "Chuck ain't been in here, I know that. I asked Carrie Emerson over there at the bar a couple of times. She hadn't seen him. No, Chuck never showed up here, Garry."

The two men looked at each other. Then Carson said, slowly, "Maybe Lee would know . . ."

Garry shook his head. This thing was getting to be too much for him. His thoughts spun. "I don't know what we better do next," he muttered. "Find Chuck first or call in the town marshal. He ain't too friendly a cuss, though."

"That girl might get to Lee and let him

loose," said Carson. "You better go back and see. I'll go and look for Chuck."

GARRY considered that for a moment. Perhaps they should both go back. *Was Carson afraid?* He said, "All right then. I'll go back. You look in the livery stables and in stores—maybe take a look in the back alleys."

Carson paled a little at that. "If he's around, I'll find him," he said, and they parted, Carson heading toward Sunset, which was Overland's main street. Lights were beginning to bloom yellowly from the saloons and store windows, fighting back at the onrolling dark.

As he left Carson a man passed Garry in the dark, a man he somehow felt he knew. The man was clean-shaven, and was clad in a neat dark gray suit with the trouser legs covering the boot shanks to the instep, town fashion. Garry looked after him, vaguely feeling he should know that brisk walk. The man was plainly heading for Snyder's livery and corral, where Carson was going. Garry shook his head, baffled; the man's face had been in shadow.

Reaching Cleary's, Garry stopped by the window and looked into the bar. The girl was still sitting at the table, obviously ill at ease now, as she toyed with a drink. She kept looking nervously toward the stairway.

Some of the men at the bar were watching her. One of them passed some kind of a remark, and all of a sudden the girl got up and walked out, leaving her drink half finished. Outside, Garry saw her hesitate for a moment, turn and move swiftly away down the street.

What to do now? Garry wondered. It was at this moment, above the music and hum of voices in the room, that he heard the sound of a single shot. Like a signal, that started him on his way suddenly.

At Snyder's he walked through the stable portal and down the dark aisle, over which a single lantern cast a meager light. In passing the stalls where the crew's horses were stabled, he halted with a start. *Chuck's horse was missing!*

In the back of the livery was a large corral, and to the left of that, a wagon yard, bordered by a long, low wagonshed. With the noise of the street behind him, Garry lingered in the rear stable doorway, surveying the corral and yard, trying to distinguish objects in the dim light. Something stirred by the front of the buckboard over under the shed, and he called softly, "Carson, Carson!"

A low groan answered him. Keeping in the shadow of the hay and feed barn next door, he crossed the yard and ran along under the shed roof. He found Carson, and kneeling, his left hand probed inside the puncher's shirt.

The touch of a thousand dollars had indeed brought the swarthily handsome cowhand no luck. There was no heart beat under Garry's tense fingers, which came out warmly sticky. Carson lay sprawled on his back, his mouth agape, his last hand played.

CHAPTER FIVE

Receipted in Gunsmoke!

GARRY's brain whirled as he stood crouched by the buckboard, crazy fear and crazy white-hot anger sweeping him simultaneously. Suddenly he backed in under the vehicle.

A figure detached itself from the corral and edged cautiously down along the shed, the man picking his way carefully in the shadows. Once a shade was pulled up in a window out on the street and a shaft of yellow light fell on the gray-clad shape of the man with the porkpie sombrero whom Garry had seen on Sunset a short time before.

The light must have caught Garry also for the man immediately fired two quick shots, one punching him in the left shoulder and the second grazing his temple and knocking his hat off. Garry felt a sharp, numbing pain. Then swift, warm darkness closed around him suddenly . . .

Now doors and windows banged and voices called out.

The voices blended and rose to a confusing murmur as Garry came slowly back to consciousness. He had a dim awareness of someone bending over him, tearing open his coat. Then all went black again.

There was still blackness when the dark fog eventually lifted from him.

At once he sat up, realization hitting him with icy shock. His right temple pounded painfully, and the whole side of his face seemed stiff and lifeless.

The noises and lights from the streets had dimmed considerably, indicating that the hour must be well past midnight. He remembered to pick up his dropped pistol, still fully loaded, as he rose weakly to his feet and tried to focus his eyes in the gloom.

He found the door next to the bakery and went up the dark, rickety stairs to the second floor. A single dim oil lamp burned in the narrow hall. "Miss Weaver," he called softly.

A door swung open, and the girl stood there, her eyes staring as if seeing a ghost. He lurched toward her, and saw her expression change suddenly. "I—I need your help," he gasped, and staggered past her into the room. Then everything went black again.

When he looked up from her bed she had his shirt off and was cleaning the bullet wound in his shoulder. He stretched out his arm and tried to flex his fingers. "Pretty stiff yet," he muttered. But the arm felt better. "I—I guess I'm an awful bother," he grinned.

"You're no bother," she said instantly, and Garry was aware how strange she looked without her make-up, as if she had suddenly slipped off a mask and was at last her real self. He stared at her. "Why do you have to put on all that paint?" he asked her abruptly, but she only shook her head and handed him a glass of whiskey.

"Drink this," she said. "No, you'd better stay on the bed for a while. That hole in your shoulder is pretty ugly."

BUT the liquor had given him new strength, and he swung his feet to the floor as he noticed his gun on the table. "I got things to do," he said, and then was staring dazedly at something else on the table. "What's this! Where did they come from?" he demanded.

"They fell out of your coat."

To his utter amazement, he was holding Chuck Wheeler's empty money belt and Brant Benson's copy of the bill of sale for the herd! "So that was the way," he breathed slowly.

Abruptly, he broke and checked his six-shooter. Then holstering it, he reached for his shirt. "Help me, will you?" he said. "I got to hurry . . ."

"You'd better wait," the girl said quietly. "You stay here and rest, and in the morning we'll get the marshal."

"It'll be too late, then—maybe is already."

Reluctantly, she helped him get his shirt and coat on. In the door she said hesitantly, with a shy tenderness in her voice: "You—you really shouldn't go . . ."

He turned and looked down at her, and for a second time the thought was queerly in his mind how nice she would look in a kitchen apron instead of a dance hall girl's spangles.

Her lips quivered. "I—I wish you wouldn't go . . ."

On a sudden impulse, he put his arms around her and kissed her. "Who can tell," he said, turning to go out. "Maybe I'll be back."

The man in the dark gray suit was waiting in the alley mouth across from Cleary's, and Garry drew a deep breath as he crept up on him from the blackness of the alley. So, he hadn't got to Lee after all!

Even now, as Garry inched soundlessly toward the man, it dawned upon him how Lee's instant reaction in the room had come about. Lee must have heard about the killing of Bert, or had seen him being carried into the undertaker's. Being told by Garry, that he, Garry, had just talked to Bert, had, of course, sounded like an alibi. Only a man covering up guilt would tell a lie like that. Thus each of them thought the other was the murderer. . . .

Garry was now only ten yards from the man, who was still leaning calmly against the house corner, keeping a patient eye on Cleary's on the other side of the street. Sooner or later, he must be figuring, Lee would have to show up. . . .

The tension got too much for Garry, and he sent his voice softly into the darkness. "Waiting for somebody, friend?

The figure whirled, a pistol glinting in the moonlight. The pistol moved in a swift arc and a bullet whistled past Garry's temple.

Garry's gun spoke, once, twice. The pistol dropped from the man's hand as he staggered, his arms moving lackadaisically. Then he spun slowly and suddenly collapsed.

Garry went up and kicked off the man's hat with a flick of his boot. Chuck Wheeler had shaved his mustaches off. He had trimmed his eyebrows and cut his hair short. And he had on a new gray suit.

"HE TRIED to kill me," Garry reasoned, "because I knew about the cinch. . . . Then he didn't know how much I might have told the others; and with all of them out of the way and the money belt and bill of sale found on *my* dead body, and he disguised, everybody naturally would be on the trail of Garry Nolan an' not Chuck Wheeler, who was supposed to be dead. And Klaffke left town last night."

"Well I guess it jibes at that," grunted the marshal, the next morning. And the doctor nodded as he rebandaged Garry's shoulder. "That bullet there is a .38, like the ones I took out of Bert and that Carson hombre. As far as I can see, they're from the same gun. None of the others carried anything but .45s."

They were in the doctor's office, with Lee nursing his bandaged hand off in a corner. Lee and Garry were looking strangely, somewhat uncomfortably, at each other. At last Lee voiced Garry's thoughts: "Just goes to show you, you never can tell about an hombre. That damned money. . . ."

Now, that damned money was reposing safely in the Overland Express Company's safe.

"What do you aim to do now?" asked Lee later, in the street.

"Dunno." Garry shrugged. "Was thinkin' maybe of drifting up Montana-way."

He strolled down the street feeling empty and lonesome.

He lingered outside Snyder's, where his horse was stabled. It sure was right; you never could tell about an hombre. . . . But what about a girl? What about that?

He recalled her sad, somehow lonely eyes; her smile, the sudden tears. . . . And the way she had handed Bert's money back to him. . . .

He glanced north, up through Sunset and beyond. Montana? Maybe he'd head up Montana way. And then again, maybe he wouldn't!

THE END

COLT CONTAGION

By MARVIN DE VRIES

"Reach, everybody! It's a hold-up!"

Sheriff Dan Rigbee laid a nicely baited, sure-fire trap for the Polk boys, then had to act as decoy for the most murderous gang of road-agents ever to lay a bullet-blight along the dusty stage-trails. . . .

OLD PORT CHANDLER drove the stage coach, with the dead drummer aboard, around behind the waiting room. He threw the lines down as a hostler emerged from the barn. Wrigley, the agent, knowing something was wrong because Port didn't stop in front, came out on the run. "What's the trouble, Port?"

"A dead turkey," Port said. "These drummers just don't understand them Polk boys."

Wrigley cussed under his breath and wiped his forehead. "I'll git Dan," he said.

"He's comin'," answered Port. "I motioned to him when I went past his office."

"You're sure he's dead?"

"Dead as lead could make him."

"We better git him inside, mebbe."

"Let Jerry help you. I've toted him far enough." Port strode around to the front, and ran head-on into Dan Higbee, the sheriff. "Damned Polk boys again, Dan," he said.

"Anybody hurt?"

"Just a drummer."

"Hurt bad?"

"Purty bad. He ain't breathed since I picked him up off'n the road couple hours ago. You know, Dan, them drummers carry plenty dinero sometimes. They collect accounts along the way."

"Yeah, I know."

"I betcha this feller had five hun'ert dollars on him. And then he had to go put up an argument about it. I warned him, but he just didn't understand them Polk boys."

"I reckon not."

"Some day I'm goin' to shoot all three of 'em down dead myself."

"Don't try it, Port," Dan warned. "You'll only git a bullet in your gizzard. I'll take care of those Polks."

"I wish you would," Port muttered, peevishly.

"Well, hell, can't you give me some kind of a description?"

"I should ought to. One of them stands there gabbin' with me while t'other two do the job, but I can't git a good look at 'em. An' they wear the dangdest get-ups. A lot of old duds I wouldn't be seen dead in—old levis, old shirts, old bandanas around their faces, an' different every time."

"How about their horses?"

"They're apt to ride anything that's got good ridge-runner blood. But no off-colors. I think they got a cavvy hid out some'ere."

"Makes it tough," grunted the sheriff.

"I'd like to see you beef them boys, Dan, all three of 'em. But I don't think you kin do it."

"I'll do it. Just give me time," Higbee said testily.

"Your time's runnin' short, Dan. I've heard talk around. Folks are gettin' plumb fed up."

"I'll send the boys out there an' have a look around soon as they git back. They went over to Hurley to check up on a tip the Polk boys might be over that away."

"Seems like you git a lot o' bad tips."

"Seems as though. Mebbe they jobbed up that tip themselves. I s'pose the reason they tackled you today was because they figured you'd be carryin' that Wells-Fargo cash."

"Damn' good thing we wasn't. But we gotta, tomorrow."

"I think I'll go along with you tomorrow, Port."

Wrigley and the hostler got the dead drummer inside, and Dan Higbee said he'd better take a look at him. "You got any idea who he is?" he asked around.

"Naw—that's Wrigley's worry, not mine," said the hostler.

THE drummer was laid out on a bench, his arms dangling. Dan looked him over from head to foot. "Seems like it took a lot o' lead to finish him off."

"The first shot done it," Port stated. "But them Polk boys wanted to blow him right out o' this world, I guess. They was put out because we didn't have nothin' aboard to make it worth their while."

"He's got six holes through him."

"Yeah. One of those owlhoots rode up alongside of him, an' emptied his gun, just for the hell of it. He looked like a tree in a fog when he got done shootin', with all that gunsmoke simmerin' up around him. It made him sneeze."

"It did?"

"Yeah. I noticed that once before. Last month when they got that rancher with his cattle money, he did the same thing when he got through shootin'."

"You never told me."

"Why should I tell you such a thing!" Port flared.

"It's a clue, ain't it?"

"I thought you were tryin' to find out what they look like. Hell, you can't put a picture of a sneeze on a dodger, kin you? Mebbe they spit through their teeth, too, I dunno. I can't watch everything."

"You goin' back to Green Gulch on schedule?"

"Sure I am. An' I'm comin' back here to Beartooth tomorrow on schedule, too."

"I'll be with you both ways, Port," Dan announced, and headed back for his office.

Slim Guley, his chief deputy, was there waiting for him. He was a tall, thin man, and, for a time, had been Dan's only deputy. He did most of Dan's paper work, and was good at it, too. Only lately, when the Polk boys started getting in his hair, had Dan taken on two more men Slim knew about. Slim said their trip to Hurley had been a bust. "They don't know anything about them owlhoots over there," he reported.

"That trip was just a dodge to git you out o' here, Slim," Dan declared. "Port had more trouble. He came home with a dead drummer."

Guley swore, and said that proved they'd been fandangled.

"Who give us that tip, anyway?" Dan demanded.

"Nobody in particular. They were talkin' about it at the Horseshoe Bar a couple nights ago."

"Where's Lyle an' Grumpy?"

"They're eatin'. They'll be right over."

DAN stared glumly at the dodger he had gotten out on the Polk boys. It didn't suit him at all. He didn't have any pictures, and the printed descriptions were too vague to do much good. "Looks like we're doin' somethin', anyway," he remarked. "All I got to go on is what Port says, an' they look different to him every time."

"Anybody got born a human being would

fit that description," Guley agreed sourly.

Lyle and Grumpy stamped in, picking their teeth. Dan thought they were both good men, and he was glad Slim had gotten them to come up from that Big Bend country. Grumpy never said much, but he wasn't mean-minded; at least, Dan had never found him so. Just tight-lipped. They were all three good men, but they didn't catch the damned Polk boys.

"Sit down, boys," Dan said. "I'm tryin' to work out an idea. Come on over here around the desk. You, too, Slim."

"What've you got in mind, Chief?" Slim inquired.

"Well, I tell you what I'm goin' to do. I'm goin' back to Green Gulch with Port this afternoon, an' tomorrow mornin' I'm comin' back with him over here. We'll have that Wells-Fargo cash aboard. Charley Creston'll be with us f'r gun guard, an' if those Polk boys show up, it'll be a shoot-out."

"I see," Slim said. "Quite an idea."

"That ain't the whole of it," Dan Higbee went on. "The rest is for you boys. I want to know what you think of it. If that shoot-out should go wrong, somehow, they'd git the money after all, unless it wasn't aboard. Now what I want you to do is to hold up the coach before they git a whack at it."

"What d'you mean—hold it up?"

"Just what I say—hold it up just as if you were the Polk boys. Git rigged up in a lot of old duds, just like them, and grab that money. It'll be mostly currency, an' you won't have any trouble with it. You kin smash the box, an' stuff it in your saddlebags."

"I'll be damned! I don't git the idea." Slim usually did the talking for all three of the deputies.

"I'll let Charley Creston in on it, so he won't start shootin' you boys. But I want Port to think you're the real article, because he gabs a lot, an' might give the whole thing away. Fetch the money here, an' don't say a word. If the Polk boys don't show up, they'll show their hand later, tryin' to find out who stole their thunder."

Guley thought a while, then smiled at Lyle and Grumpy, and said he guessed they could do what Dan wanted. "Why not, if we kin find some old duds like that?" he approved.

"You got to build it up right, now," warned Dan Higbee. "Do a lot of wild shooting, and scare hell out of everybody. But don't shoot nobody. An' that reminds me—Port says one o' those hombres can't sniff gunsmoke without sneezin' so one of you better practise up on that."

Slim Guley stared a long time after that, as if he thought the sheriff had gone off his head for sure, but he finally grinned again, and said he guessed they could do that, too.

"You know where them owlhoots usually make their play—over toward this end of the gorge. You make yours before that so we'll have that money in the clear." Dan got up, and moved toward the door. "Got everything straight now?"

SLIM nodded, and walked toward the door with him. "It sounds like a good idea to me, sheriff, an' we'll do the best we can." He opened the door for Dan, and let him out. "See you tomorrow, sheriff, an' don't be surprised if you don't know us." Then he closed the door, and went back to his chair.

For a second, the three of them stared at each other like owls, then they all started to laugh. "Damned if that ain't havin' it handed to you on a silver platter!" Guley said.

Then he sobered suddenly. "It ain't half as good as it sounds, though. Not half."

"How you figure that?" asked Grumpy.

"We gotta show up here with that cash, don't we?"

Grumpy scratched his head in surprise. "Yeah, I guess that's right."

"If we don't, our game's up. An' if we do, we ain't got the cash."

"You s'pose he's wise to somethin'," Lyle put in, suddenly.

"Not that ol' goat," Grumpy scoffed. "He'll never git wise to nothin'."

"Don't be too sure," Guley warned. "After that rough treatment we give that drummer today while we was supposed to be in Hurley, he's purty hot an' bothered."

"You sure filled that drummer full of lead, Slim," Lyle remarked, shaking his head.

"What'd he try to jaw me for then, damn it! I was sore, anyway, the way they changed schedules on us with that cash."

"What're we goin' to do about it now?" Grumpy muttered.

"We'll git it—an' keep it," answered Guley. "An' I'll tell you how. We'll do just what Dan said, only it'll be the other way around. We'll stage the real hold-up *first*. Dan'll think it's

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the fake one, an' it'll be easy. We'll git their guns, an' the cash, an' cache it where we got our hide-out. Then we'll circle 'round, an' stop 'em again on the fake hold-up. How would we know the Polk boys—" he laughed briefly "—got a notion to make their play closer to Green Gulch this time? That way we kin keep the cash, an' also carry out our bounden duties as lawmen."

Lyle and Grumpy grinned. "Well, I'll be damned!" Lyle exclaimed. "You sure think fast, Slim."

"That's why I'm chief deputy, an' you boys're just plain small fry."

"An' don't," Grumpy said, with a rare laugh that actually came sounding up out of his throat, "fergit to sneeze!"

They all laughed.

DAN HIGBEE spent an uneasy night in Prairie Dog Hotel at Green Gulch, but by morning he had convinced himself that nothing could go wrong. He helped Charley Creston stow the cash in the boot, and warned him again not to blow anybody's head off when his three deputies made their play. "That money'll git to Beartooth whether we do, or don't," he said. "You kin do your shootin' when the Polk boys tackle us—if they do. An' don't let on to Port."

"I won't," Charley promised.

There were three passengers. Two of them were ranchers, riding back from the rail-head at Fontaine where, Dan gathered, they had just loaded a bunch of beef. They weren't armed, as far as Dan could tell. The third man was another drummer, undaunted by what had happened the day before. "I know enough to shut up, and mind my own business," he told Dan. "All they can get out of me is samples of bolt goods, and they don't have to shoot me for them."

"Come on," Port yelled down, impatiently, "we're rollin'!"

He drove the two-span outfit with casual skill, Dan next to him on the high seat. Charlie sat up on the deck, and when they hit a rough, stretch, clattered around like a man in a fit.

"Hang on, "Port told him. "If we're goin' to have trouble, I gotta make up for it before an' after, so I kin keep to schedule."

"To hell with your schedule!" snapped Charlie. "Slow down, damn' it."

Dan didn't expect his three deputies to make their play until they got into the rough country over the hogback. Thus he was hardly ready for them when they rode up suddenly out of a willow motte beside the trail. But it was just as well they did it pronto, he figured, so the Polk boys didn't get the first lick.

Dan couldn't recognize them, their disguises were so perfect. Port cussed when they rode down and ordered him to pull up, snap-

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ping a bullet past his ears at the same time. Port pulled up and lifted his hands. Dan gave Charley a broad wink and started shooting, but he didn't hit anything. Slim—at any rate, Dan figured it was Slim—fired back, and one of the bullets whammed against Dan's gun, knocking it out of his hand and numbing his arm clear to the elbow.

"Next time it'll be in your guts, sheriff—remember that! Reach, everybody. It's a hold-up. Git down from up there, you two." He indicated Dan and Charley. "Howdy, Port."

Port mumbled under his breath as Dan and Charley climbed down. The three men in the coach got out, arms raised. Charlie flung his rifle to the ground, close to Slim's horse.

"I hear you're carryin' real dinero this time," Slim said, in a disguised voice. "Better'n yesterday."

"You boys git wind o' things, don't you," Dan remarked.

"We try. Go after it, boys. I'll take care of these gents."

The other two got the box out of the boot and smashed it open with a rock. They stuffed the currency into their saddle bags, as Dan had told them to do, then came around to the side again and went over the passengers. The two ranchers didn't have any folding money on them, but the drummer did, in spite of what he had told Dan. He had a gun, too, and before Lyle and Grumpy could get hold of his wallet he jerked back and pulled that gun out of his hip pocket. It was a small weapon, but he must have gotten off one shot because the gun showed it, later.

But Dan didn't hear it because the sound was drowned out by the roar from Slim's gun, a roar that didn't stop until Slim had emptied his gun. Dan saw the drummer bounce against the coach wheel, and he could see the bullets lace into him as he clawed and scrabbled in the dirt. And he saw the man die before the sound of Slim's gun had died.

WHEN he looked up, Slim still had his smoking gun in his hand and blue gunsmoke hovered around him in an acrid cloud. The other two men moved back and mounted. Slim gave them a brief order, then uddenly gagged. Dan watched. The blue haze lifted, and when the thick core of it hit Slim's face, he suddenly sneezed.

The sound of it was like a reprieve to Dan because it wasn't a faked attempt, it was the real article. Nobody could fake something like that, and make it sound real, so he knew, from what Port had told him the day before, that this hold-up was the real article, too. It wasn't Slim, and Lyle, and Grumpy, making their play. It was the Polk boys.

But he couldn't get much comfort out of the thought, and Port was inclined to be critical. "I could 'a' done that good alone," he remarked bluntly, after he had put a mile of road behind them.

"I had a plan, Port. It just didn't pan out right."

"Did it include another dead drummer?" asked Port sarcastically.

"Charlie, you tell him," Dan said.

When Charlie had finished explaining, Port agreed it was a good plan—if it had worked. "But it's sure a mess now, Dan," he said gloomily. "When did you first catch on it wasn't a fake?"

"Not for sure till that one hombre sneezed," replied Dan. "Remember what you told me about him, Port? He let out a good solid blast when that gunsmoke got in his nose, and right then I knew Because somethin' like that can't be faked. I've tried it. It don't sound worth a damn."

"Hmmm!" said Port, skeptically.

"Well, go ahead and try it!" snapped the sheriff peevishly.

At the end of five minutes, Port agreed it couldn't be done, and gave up trying. "Well, what's goin' to happen now?" he asked.

"My deputies still got to show up somewhere along here," said Dan.

They didn't appear, however, until the stage had crossed the hogback and was into the rock-strewn country on the other side. Port saw them first. They were waiting behind some rocks on the right-hand side of the road, and didn't come out until the stage was close to them. Then Port stopped of his own accord.

They had done a pretty good job with their get-ups, but Dan could tell the difference. They rode up with a big clatter and a lot of tough talk. In spite of the fact that he stopped of his own accord, a bullet whistled past Port's head and he yelled for them to stop their fool shennanigans.

"Hell, Slim," Dan said, wearily, "don't be a fool. They got the money already."

Slim apparently didn't hear him through

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the clatter he was making. At any rate, he kept on shooting until he had everybody in the coach spooked and a thick fog of smoke had built up around him.

Then, as it hit his face, he sneezed, just as Dan had told him to do the day before in the office. He didn't do it, though, because Dan had told him to. He did it because he couldn't help himself.

Port glanced around, and met Dan's eyes. "You stay up here, Port," Dan said. "You, too, Charlie. I want to talk to the boys."

He slid to the ground, and moved in closer. "Listen, Slim, it's all off," he explained. "The cash is gone—the Polk boys got in first."

Slowly, Slim pulled down his mask. "You mean the plan went wrong, Dan?"

"Everything's wrong!" Dan snapped. "They held us up before you got a chance to, damn it. I want your horse, Slim, an' your gun. I'm goin' back after those hombres. You go on in with Port. Lyle an' Grumpy an' I'll see what we kin do."

Slim frowned. "Okay, off with them damn masks, boys," he told the others. "Hell, Dan, I'd like to go along with you, too."

"Two's enough, Slim. Go on with Port."

Grudgingly, Slim slid out of the saddle. When he hit the ground, he twirled the gun butt forward in his hand, and gave it to Dan.

DAN backed off, so he could keep all three of them covered. He figured Slim probably had a sneak gun, but he hadn't dared to ask him for that. The two ranchers were watching through the door. Port and Charlie hadn't moved.

Dan Higbee weighed the gun in his hand. "I won't do much talkin'," he said curtly. "You three are the Polk boys."

The tense silence that whipped down on them was like a blow. Slim finally broke it.

"Not me, sheriff," he said, and whipped out his sneak gun. But he didn't get off his shot. He was standing close to the front wheel of the coach, and all Port had to do was turn a little and kick him a hard blow, square in the back of the neck. Slim wilted.

Dan had his hands full with Lyle and Grumpy. One shot cut across his ribs, and almost winded him. He fired two back, but Lyle's horse was boogered, and he missed. Then, when he tried a third, the hammer went home with a click. The gun was empty!

At that moment he saw Charlie Creston coming off the deck in a dive that brought him down on Grumpy's neck with a jolt that must have broken it instantly. The horse went out from under them, and they both crashed.

Grumpy landed with his head twisted under him, and if his neck wasn't already broken, it broke then, because a bone snapped with a sound like a dry twig breaking, and he didn't move again. "Hell, I must've broken his neck," Charlie yelled, getting up.

"Don't shoot, Dan!" Lyle quavered now. "I'll take you to the hide-out! I'll—"

"All right," Dan snapped. "Git down."

Lyle scrambled down from his horse.

"Throw down your gun," Dan Higbee ordered, and Lyle flung it from him as if it was a rattler. Dan picked it up. "This one I got here's empty," he explained dryly.

But fear had its grip on Lyle now, and he didn't seem to realize he had missed his chance. He stared at Dan blankly.

Then it happened. Dan's head was suddenly back, his eyes squeezed tight, his mouth held open in a peculiarly expectant way. . . .

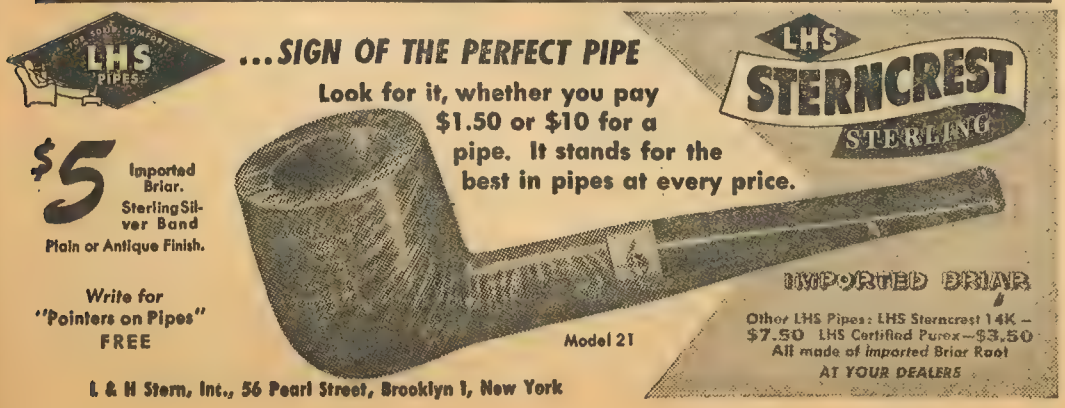
"G-grab holt of him, Charlie!" Dan gasped out. "Quick!"

Charlie flung his arms around Lyle as the sheriff bent over, clutching at his stomach. Port saw it, and thinking his friend had been seized with a cramp, started to scramble down from the driver's seat.

At the same instant, Dan let go with a violent sneeze.

"Damn that gunsmoke!" he wheezed, straightening. "I wonder if that's catching."

THE END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CHAPTER ONE

Hands of the Phantom

STRANGE projects were afoot, that moonlight night in the deep *bosque* across the river from the Pueblo of Los Angeles. Brown and bitter men, fearfully persecuted and hunted like rabbits, met in a secret place to plot their revenge. Heavy-handed hirelings of the *rico,* whose vast new home sat majestically on the hill, prowled the bottoms in search of those they were pleased to call "tres-

GUNSMOKE MIRACLE

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

passers." And, moving along a shadowy trail with no more noise than the faint slap of his cossock against his muscled calves, another pressed his quest—a strange mixture of good and evil, mercy and savagery, saintliness and violence—Friar Robusto.

The friar was trespassing the Delfino Grant by design, chancing the fury of killer *vaqueros* who continually patrolled the holding. Through the offices of one whose business was listening and purveying information for a price, Robusto had learned of the secret gathering in the *bosque* and was moving in, not to halt it, not to lend himself to its purposes, but to bring a word of cheer to the participants and assurance that influential men, stepping up to the governor's chair, were searching the statutes for some way of mullifying a vast steal, of righting a great wrong.

With the silence of a wraith, Robusto came to the edge of the clearing and paused to stare through draping grape vines at a wild scene. The moon shone upon a gathering of bearded, gaunt-eyed men, dressed in rags and armed with bows, lances and other makeshift weapons which they lifted toward the sky as they hailed, in croaking whispers, the softly spoken words of the leader in their midst.

"Brothers," the words came to Robusto's ears, "we must wait no longer! We are doomed unless we flee to far places. One by one, they will wipe us out. Already half of our number is dead, and we live like mangy

coyotes. Flores Altamira, the richest man in California, lives in his castle on the hill, having razed the adobes we were born in, and our fathers before us. What is there left for us?"

"Kill Altamira!"

"Tear his castle down, brick by brick, upon his head!"

"Kill him slow . . . by fire!"

"How he dies, brothers, does not matter." The leader maintained a strange calm. "But die he must . . . tonight. We shall approach his house from four sides. There will be fighting, to get past his paid bodyguards. Some of us will die, but some must get through to finish Altamira. Let no man falter or fail to give his all, even unto death."

The response would have been a wild cheer had they turned it fully loose. But as they gulped in their breaths, they were frozen by a voice:

"And so, my children, you condemn yourselves to death? Very well, then it is only fitting that I hold mass and offer a prayer for your souls, no?"

They pivoted, holding their rude weapons, watching the friar approach with fear and doubt and stubbornness written on their moonlit faces. Most of them knew him, at least by sight, for this was the remnant of the vast organization of workers who had owned loyalty to the Delfino family, and their forebears before them. The friar paused, smiling into their strained faces as he resumed:

"Shame! Violating God's statutes and taking the law into your own hands just when influence is being brought upon the governor in your behalf. Come now, let us sit here and see if we cannot arrive at a saner solution—one that need not be paid for in blood. After all, there are your women and children. What of them?"

And while they withheld words, thinking how they might get rid of this friar who stood in the way of their vengeance, wild yells burst from the *bosque* around them. The bushes crackled as spurred horses surged into the clearing. A great booming voice filled the night: "Kill them! Kill them every one!"

Gunfire slashed crimson pencils of flame across the interval. A man shrieked: *"Madre de Dios!,"* and died. Gun echoes woke a thunder in the *bosque*. Bowstrings twanged. A horseman thudded to the ground, his body transfixed with a dart. Screaming curses, venting a terrible hate, the one-time Delfino cohorts fought back briefly, then scattered like wildlings. And Robusto, having no confidence in his robes as against the deadliness of flying lead and charging hoofs, ducked for cover, with nothing worse than a bullet hole through his cassock.

Winded from his quick, hard run, the friar squatted in a thicket, listening to the horsemen beat the brush for victims, lashed on by the booming voice of Flores Altamira. Robusto smiled coldly as the efforts of Altamira's men proved utterly unavailing. The cruel and greedy *rico* soon tired of this empty pleasure.

"Comb every bush for a mile in each direction!" he roared. "I return to the house to wait for your trophies of the hunt. I will be content with twenty-five hands. Right hands, you hear me? One each from twenty-five of these lawless, stubborn *bandidos! Adios!"*

HE LEFT behind him the muttering of followers weary of this fruitless chase. In the brush, these hunted skulkers were as safe as in God's pocket. What did Altamira expect? Their grousing brought another smile to Robusto's lips as he removed his cassock and pouched girdle, from which he took two guns and a striped mask which had become a fearful legend in the Californias. Then he was cautiously, swiftly, threading the brush aisles.

When Flores Altamira put his horse up the bank and emerged from the *bosque*, he was confronted by a human figure standing like a bronze statue on the moon-drenched *potrero*. The *rico* drew rein, strangling a curse. And, in the moonglow, his ruddy face turned a pasty gray. His hand went to the long pistol sheathed at his hip as he croaked: "What devil's play is this? What do you want? Who are you?"

Deadly eyes glittered behind the striped mask. The voice was sepulchral. "You know who I am, Flores Altamira. *El Salteador Espectro*—the Phantom Highwayman!"

"What do you want?" demanded the *rico*, and there was a quaver in his voice.

"I want you, Altamira. This is the *paga*—payment for the suffering you have brought upon the humble servitors of the late Don Modesto Delfino. And for the theft of the finest *rancho* anywhere about the pueblo of Los Angeles. Tonight you restore these lands to their rightful owners by deed, and set aside a substantial portion of your wealth for the widows and orphans of those you have slain to secure your ill-gotten gains."

Altamira's voice dripped scorn. "As usual, Phanto, you flaunt the spirit of the law under which we live."

"Only the letter of it, Don Flores. The letter you *ricos* bend to your own greedy ends by skillful use of stolen money. The palms you greased to have that fraudulent paper legalized as the last will and testament of Modesto Delfino is a glaring example."

"You lie!" Altamira's voice rose excitedly, as if he were sending out a call for help. "That will was genuine. Don Modesto was my friend. All he had, he owed to my kind offices."

"You have proven that," said the Phantom, calmly. "And I cannot prove you wrong, even

though we both know it to have no basis in truth. But we waste time. Come; we go to your *casa,* where you will draw and sign the papers."

"That I will never do," declared Altamira stubbornly.

"Either that, Altamira, or you die."

"Then die I shall," gritted the *rico,* "destroying the curse of the Californias!" He sank his cruel spurs into the sides of his trembling horse, hurled it toward the Highwayman. His pistol sprang to his hand. The Phantom was leaping toward him; he was close and the bullet should not have missed, but it had no appreciable effect. Altamira cried out, remembering the legends of this wraith that was immune to death-dealing instruments. Then his horse, struck on the nose by *El Salteador Espectro,* reared up and back, toppling to its side.

The *rico* was thrown sprawling and the Highwayman was upon him, grasping him with a grip of steel, jerking him erect. Altamira had retained hold of his pistol and he swung it at his assailant. A chopping blow to his forearm numbed his fingers, and he dropped the gun. Altamira then grappled the masked figure, fighting savagely. And though he was a strong man himself, the power against him was paralyzing. The highwayman swept him off his feet, lifted him high, juggled him a moment, then hurled him crushingly to the ground. Altamira screamed once, a terror-filled sound cut off abruptly as he struck the earth. When his horsemen, drawn by sounds of conflict, rode to his side, they found him lying under the moon, white and bloody, looking like death.

CHAPTER TWO

Dead Man's Revelation

FRIAR ROBUSTO, humming the tune of a country dance, toiled up the hill to the dooryard of the Altamira mansion. The windows blazed with lights, making a brave and cheerful backdrop for the well-tended flowering gardens. But there was nothing brave and gay about the cluster of dismounted horsemen outside the doorway.

"*Hola,* who's this?" growled one, as they pivoted at the sound of his approach.

"A priest," said another. "And the *patron* is begging for one."

"A friar," sneered a third. "A filthy mendicant. Likely the same one who met with those slinking *cabrones* in the *bosque.* What do you want, beggar?"

"Food, my children," said Robusto. "God made bellies to be filled, and who is better able to fill a poor mendicant's belly than the rich Don Flores?"

"Go away," snapped one. "There is nothing here for you."

"Let me see Don Flores, my sons," protested Robusto. "Surely his heart is not so hard."

"He cannot see you. He—he's dying. Struck down by the devil's own spawn, at the edge of the *bosque.*"

"Dying?" Robusto pushed in among them. "Then why do you wait? Lead me to him that I may administer last rites. Hurry!"

He walked past them and entered the house. A frightened servant goggled at him, made the sign of the cross, and said: "God must have sent you, Padre. The master is dying. Come."

Robusto followed him into a bed chamber where Flores Altamira lay in a massive bed, his hands crossed on his chest, his face gray as a ghost's. His eyes, lackluster and deeply sunken, followed the friar's movement to the bed. His pallid lips moved but no sound came. He was far gone, past confession, and Robusto's prayer and simple rites seemed to move him only in the direction of peace. And when it was over, the *rico* caught at Robusto's hand, sighed and closed his eyes. His hand was cold, his grip weak. He seemd to fall asleep, yet the grip persisted until, two hours later, the

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medico came riding out from the pueblo to pronounce him dead. Not until then did the friar disengage his hand and pick up the small, leather-bound book that jutted out from under his pillow.

It was Don Flores' diary and solemn-faced servants, *mozos* and *vaqueros* watched Robusto as he thumbed the pages.

"That is the master's journal," said the majordomo, anxiously. "What does it say . . . about us?"

Robusto closed the book, thrust it inside his cassock. "It is not a will," he told them. "In it he makes no provision for those he leaves behind. But its pages are sprinkled with records of greed, dishonestly and sinfulness. He even writes the history of his theft of this rancho, naming his confederates in the grand steal. In the absence of his spoken confession, this must suffice. I take it with me to San Gabriel, as a basis for interceding for his soul's rest, and punishment of those who were guilty along with him."

Taking no chance on their rallying and making custodianship of the diary an issue, he signed them a *pax vobiscum* and left the house. He did he travel missionward by road, however. He took to the brush and lined a direct course for San Gabriel, twenty-five miles away.

TWO days later, while busy with his quill in his mission cubicle, Robusto was interrupted by a lay brother, who bore a summons from venerable Father Manuel, the Superior. Answering this, he found the aged priest with a burly, hard-faced man who eyed him with undisguised enmity as he dropped into the chair indicated by Father Manuel.

"My son," began the Father Superior, "Señor Garcia has been sent here by the *Jefe de Policia* of Los Angeles to fetch you to the Pueblo for questioning."

"Questioning?" Robusto arched his brows.

"Regarding the death of Altamira," added Garcia. "There are things about his dying that Jefe Linares wants cleared up. You attended him in his last moments, we are told. You'll do this?"

"Why not?" The friar shrugged. "However, I can add nothing to what must already be known. Don Flores was past talking when I entered his *casa.*" He rose, moved toward the door. "I will eat and hurry to the pueblo. . . ."

"I have a horse for you, Padre," broke in Garcia. "You shall have the best of food when we arrive."

Garcia had three men with him, heavily armed, scowling fellows wearing the arm bands of the *policia.* They formed around him as he mounted and throughout the ride maintained this tight, guarded formation. This troubled Robusto's thoughts, but he continued to smile and to disregard their sullen indifference to his attempts to make small talk. They acted as if they were afraid he might get away from them, but Robusto found escape farthest from his mind. He didn't want to escape. Most certainly not.

Their movements when they approached Los Angeles in the late afternoon were not surprising to the friar. Instead of riding directly to the plaza and the *cuartel* of the *Jefe,* they turned left at the outskirts of the pueblo, pulling up finally before a sprawling adobe that overlooked the river. Here they were admitted by a servant who said: "Don Julio is expecting you, señores." He showed them into a big room where a gaunt-faced, bushy-haired man sat expectantly behind a carved desk. His voice rolled sonorously.

"Good evening, *amigos.* Welcome. You have our friar, Don Maurilio. Any trouble at all?"

"None, Don Julio. Until this moment, perhaps, he has had no idea that we were not what we seemed—*officiales de policia.*"

Blood pounded in Robusto's throat but he continued to smile sweetly at those around him. The man behind the desk he knew by sight; he was Julio Zamora—lawyer, counsellor to Flores Altamira and other *ricos,* undercover politician and possessed of great wealth, vast influence and boundless ambition. This Maurilio Garcia he had known from the first was in no way connected with the police. Indeed, Garcia's only worry had been the guardians of the law, for he was the proprietor of the notorious Fonda Grande, with its gambling parlors, its tough hangerson, and its sinister secrets.

And the three who, with Garcia, had formed his guard from the mission; Robusto knew them too. The handsome bearded one was Enrique Ximenes, wealthy sheep owner, and the other two were exalted by the title Superintendents of Flocks, but were in reality rascals of a low order, killers when occasion demanded it. Already a smelly school of fish was in the net. What a nauseous fry! And yet, because there were others to be sucked in, Robusto had to play innocent.

"What?" he demanded. "Is this not the *Jefe de Policia?* Am I not in the *cuartel?* Then what. . . ?"

JULIO ZAMORE stood up, resting his knuckles upon his desk. "Mendicant," he said, dropping his ease of manner, "I will come to the point. You have a diary, taken from the house of Don Flores Altamira. I want it."

"Ah-h-h!" The friar grinned. "I understand why, having read it, señor. An extremely interesting day-by-day confession, señores.

But, unfortunately for your desire, the Church holds the confession confidential, secret and inviolate."

"Enough of words, Friar." Zamora pounded the desk. "Fetch me the diary by tomorrow night and I will pay you five hundred *pesos de oro.*"

Robusto chuckled. "Señor, you astound me! Is it that the diary is worth so little? Or had you thought you could buy the honor of the mission so cheaply? But no matter; the price is outrageous."

"A thousand, confound you!"

"Señor! After all!" Robusto drew himself up in stern dignity. "But let it not be said that a good servant of the Church overlooks an opportunity to further its vast charities. Look now; an objective dearest to my heart is to return the ousted servitors of the late Don Modesto Defino to their rightful heritage. And, if that proves impossible because of a prostitution of justice, to reimburse them for their losses, the suffering and humiliations they have endured, and the hardness and bitterness planted in their once happy hearts. My price for the diary, señores, is five hundred thousand *pesos de oro*—one hundred thousand from each of the five men incriminated in Flores Altamira's confession!"

It wrung a gasp from Zamora and astonished them all with its audacity. Five hundred thousand *pesos de oro*—an unheard-of sum. And yet, two men in this room, and a number of others prominent in Los Angeles social circles, could produce one fifth that amount without distress to their respective businesses.

"You're crazy!" flared Lawyer Zamora. "There's not that much money in all the Californias."

"In that you are wrong, señor," said Robusto, gently. "But assuming you are right; to settle this long overdue account, I will accept negotiable assets according to that which each of the *caballeros* possesses in the greatest abundance. Never let it be said that Friar Robusto failed to meet a man fairly."

"Fairly? Fairly?" Enrique Ximenes was spluttering, crimson-faced with rage. "You pig-headed beggar, I'll show you how to meet a man fairly! And when I get done with you, you'll be begging to return the book you stole . . . for nothing. Mateo! Chapo! Seize this gluttonous friar, bind him and. . . ."

His two trouble-shooters had leaped forward at his call, their faces aglow with anticipation. Then they were pulling up short and Ximenes' tirade was clipped off. For the smiling friar's hands had moved and from somewhere he palmed two black-nosed, ugly pistols.

"Señores!" Robusto moved aside so as the easier to cover them all. "I am amazed that men under the black shadow of such guilt should be so lacking in reasonableness. Careful, Zamora! I can shoot your head off before you can reach the pistol in that desk. I should raise my price, señores, but I am a patient, kindly man. It is still five hundred thousand. Maybe I will hear from you later. I hope so. When his excellency, the governor, reads that diary he will be asking for heads, not *pesos de oro. Adios.*"

HE backed from the room, left the house and rode back to San Gabriel on the animal so kindly provided for his comfort. He rode with no illusions. If these *ricos* were worried before, they would be desperate now. Already Julio Zamora was pulling strings calculated to make him the next governor of Alta California. A breath of this scandal would effectually deny him that honor. Ximenes, in litigation with the government on tax matters, would have his case hopelessly prejudiced were he to be implicated in the seizure of the Delfino Grant. Their next move would not be one of half measures.

Back at the mission, Father Manuel was full of curiosity. "Were you able to help the law, my son? Anything we can do to assist in the apprehension of those responsible for the murder of Señor Altamira. . . ."

"Nothing I could have said to those scoundrels," answered Robusto, "would have helped the law, Father. They care nothing about the killing of Don Flores except as it affects their own skins."

"You mean that Senor Garcia and his riders were not—"

"Maurilio Garcia owns the hellish Fonda Grande. His interest in the law is only that of one who flouts it professionally. He was sent here to fetch me to certain *ricos*, implicated in the diary of Flores Altamira—men guilty of many crimes, men whose money lifts them above the punishment of our courts."

"Diary?" Father Manuel scowled. "What have you to do with such a diary, my son?"

"I have it, Father. I took it from under Flores Altamira's pillow, after he was dead."

"That was very wrong, Robusto. You must return it, at once."

"In good time, Father. The man was past confession, so how can I intercede for the rest of his soul unless I have proper knowledge of his sins, which he sets forth in the diary? And, fully as important, why should I not use it as evidence of the guilt of Altamira and others, to insure justice for the poor folk to whom Modesto Delfino left his estate? We have talked about it, Father. It is something worthy of our best effort. When I have thoroughly digested these revelations, I will go over it with you in detail."

There was revulsion in the heart of the saintly old priest who administered the spiritual and temporal life of the mission. He was

full of arguments dealing with the responsibility of the priesthood in matters of confession. But his every argument was met by Robusto with a stubborn firmness he could not break down. Wearying at last, Father Manuel sighed. "I must rest, my son, and think. Later I shall hand down a judgment which I shall expect you to obey."

Friar Robusto embraced this loveable old man of slight strength. "Forgive me for tiring you, Father, but I cannot lightly pass up this last slim hope of those poor, bedeviled people because of an unfeeling rule of the church. As you pray for guidance, pray also for them."

And pray Father Manuel did. The personnel of the mission recognized that some great burden rested on the bent shoulders of the Father Superior, and they tried in every possible way to avoid disturbing him. It was late the next night that he sent for Robusto. His faded eyes were sunken and there was no joy in his soul.

"My son," he began, heavily, "no act of good or mercy can justify the commission of sin. You must return the diary to the Altamira household."

"But Father, what about those pitiable, homeless—"

"You must return the diary, my son, without delay."

Full of rebellion, Robusto stood. "Very well, Father. I shall hand it over."

He walked stiffly out and made his way to his dark cubicle. As he reached for flint and tinder, a faint rustle froze him in an attitude of listening. In a dark corner, a figure stirred. The friar said: "Who is that?"

The intruder broke for the door, Robusto after him. He caught the fellow by his collar, spun him around. A knife glittered and Robusto went backward to avoid the stroke, lashing out with a guarache-clad foot in a mule-like kick that took the man in the belly. Breath whooshed from his lungs and he went down, gasping. Robusto flung himself upon his foe, caught the knife-weilding arm, and wrenched the weapon from strong fingers. He stunned the struggling man with a sharp blow to the temple, hurled him again to the floor and stood over him while he lighted a taper. When he lifted the moaning, unkempt man to his feet, the friar's own jaw was agape. "Juan!" he croaked. "Juan de Osa! What are you doing here?"

CHAPTER THREE

Robusto Trapped

THIS Juan de Osa was a miserable beggar from the plaza, in Los Angeles. Possessed of a powerful body and a mind totally unfitted for responsibility, he sat outside the Church of *Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles* and begged alms. Robusto, having pitied him, had done much to help him—less in the way of alms than in endeavors to place him in pleasant, carefree work. Now that he thought of it, he had secured him a place with Altamira's head gardener. And another as a sheepherder with one of Ximenes' flocks. But always, sooner or later, he was back on the plaza, begging.

"What would you have here, Juan?" he demanded again of the half-stunned beggar.

The man shook himself. "I was but begging food at the kitchen door," he muttered vaguely, "and came inside to warm my bones."

Had the night been cold, Robusto could still have read the lie in his eyes. "The truth, Juan! Who sent you here?"

The beggar raallied from the rough handling. "Ah, one cannot lie to a padre. I was sent here, *friale,* to search your room for a little red book. And to kill you if you caught me. But, before God, how was I to know you were my good friend—the kind-hearted friar?"

"Who sent you, dolt? Speak! Who paid you to do this thing?"

Juan de Osa wanted to avoid the answer, but Robusto's will forced him. "It was Senor Yorba, Padre. Sixto Yorba, the rich gambler of the *calle de los Negros.* But he did not pay me; honestly he didn't."

"You owe that rich rogue enough to make you do this without money? Nonsense! You expect me to believe that?"

"But no, Padre. Had I fetched him the book, he would have paid me ten silver *pesos.* Had I brought him the book and proof of your death, I was to get a hundred *pesos.* But had I known—"

"You fool!" The friar glowered at him. "Don't you know they would have knocked you in the head if you had succeeded? Do you think they would have let you live to tell what they had hired you to do?" A faint smile overspread the friar's face. "Ah-h, at last I find someone who puts a price on me. Ninety silver *pesos;* not bad and not too good. I had hoped I was worth more. What was to happen if you returned with neither the book nor proof of my death?"

"Then I was to meet with other *ricos* who were to fix a price to be paid myself and some trusted helper to kill you, Padre. But, as I said, had I known—"

"They deserve to fail," broke in Robusto, "offering so little! Had they made it five hundred thousand *Pesos de Oro,* I could send you back with proof of my death. But seeing it's so little, we will go see this Yorba, Juan. Where can he be found?"

"At his big house, on the Figueroa Zanje. But Padre—"

"I know. You think it's dangerous. For Friar Robusto, it would be. But I shall go as Killer Navaja—a professional assassin of your acquaintance. Now go outside. I'll meet you there in a few minutes."

De Osa moved stolidly from the room, chuckling: "Killer Navaja! Ha! What a very devil of a fellow this *friale* is. What a dare-devil! With him beside me, I am not even afraid of Sixto Yorba. . . ."

He was gone then and Robusto secreted the diary under the loose flagstone, taking from this same vault some filthy, ill-fitting clothes and a loose hat. He looked to the loads in two pistols, whetted a knife and slipped out of the mission. Riding double on de Osa's small but agile-footed mule, he and the beggar set out for Los Angeles.

THE fine house of the rich gambler was set back from the *zanje,* in a pleasant setting of sour limes and pepper trees, flowering gardens and splashing fountains. The hour was late, but Yorba had just finished his supper and was dressing to leave for his gambling parlor in Calle de los Negros. His coach waited before the door.

A servant admitted de Oso and his companion and Yorba met them in the *gran sala,* a room fitted with antiques from Spain and the Indies. His eyes lighted at sight of de Osa. "Ah, beggar! What do you bring me?"

De Osa cringed. "*Ay de mi,* but nothing, señor. The mission is large and there are many priests about. As for the friar with the scar on his cheek, the lights are so faint that—"

"Enough, you brainless son of mismated goats." Anger convulsed Sixto Yorba. "I should have had more sense than to send a dolt like you. Here!" He tossed a silver *peso* which the beggar caught dexterously. "The servant will let you and your filthy *amigo* out as you came."

It was a death sentence and Robusto knew it. If he guessed right, the moment they were outside they would be set upon and slain. "Wait!" he commanded. "What of me? I was brought here by the promise that I would be paid to kill a man. Killer Navaja is not so easily pushed aside as this. What have you to say, Yorba?"

The boldness of it, or perhaps the ready weapons at his sash, whetted Yorba's interest. His dark eyes fixed Robusto with a sternly appraising glance. "Killer Navaja, eh? I have not heard of you, *hombre.*"

"In Sonora," snapped the friar, "I am known as one who never fails, one who always collects a promised fee . . . or takes his price in blood. I assure you, señor, my reputation will stand up in Alta California."

"Yes?" Yorba licked his lips and his hand moved closer to the small bell that sat on the stand. "What is your price?"

"That depends upon how much this friar is worth to you. . . . dead."

"One hundred *pesos,* Navaja. Half now and half when you fetch me the friar's head."

"One hundred *pesos?*" Robusto laughed. "A few peso each for the dozen stout fellows who follow me and who wait outside the door for our safe return, Yorba. Let us be business-like. Five thousand *pesos,* half now."

The gambler tried to haggle, but he was unnerved by the savage glare in the bullet-straight eyes of the one he supposed to be a heartless killer. He had a loaded pocket gun on his person but well he knew he would be dead before ever he could draw it. Sighing, he gave in, counted the sum from a fat wallet and passed it to Robusto. The friar, knowing this duress was futile until he and de Osa were well away from the house, strode to an open

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window and called softly: "Apolonio. . . . here." And after a momentary wait: "Take this money, Apolonio, and bid the men stand ready. If I have not joined you in five minutes, tear this house down and kill everyone in it." Whereupon, he dropped the blood payment into the flower bed below the deep sill.

The friar had to smile when he saw De Osa's astonished face and the gambler's patent fear. "I thank you, Yorba," he said, and meant it. He was thinking how very handy this sum would be to Father Manuel, upon whom the State was levying more money than could be quickly or conveniently raised without a call upon some usurer. "And now my *compañero* and I bid you good night." He listened to the soft closing of a door somewhere in the large house, the muted murmur of voices. The sounds died away and he added: "The head of the friar with the scarred cheek is as good as in in your lap. Be pleased to have the money ready."

"But you," said Yorba. "You too have a scarred cheek. Can it be that I have been jobbed? Could a friar so profane his cloth as to exchange it for the filthy rags of a killer and blackmailer?"

Before Robusto could answer that, a voice boomed behind him. "And that, you gullible fool, is exactly what you have done. This man is Friar Robusto, who has what we want!"

THE friar spun about, drawing his pistols as he moved. He had a brief glimpse of Julio Zamora and Enrique Ximenes, filling the doorway. Behind them were Maurilio Garcia, the panderer and one Robles Berdusco who was growing rich building houses and importing fine furnishings for those who could meet his price. The Ximenes men and others crowding into the hall didn't matter. There had been six involved in the steal of the Delfino Grant; Robusto had known that without knowing just who they were. Now he knew. Altamira, Zamora, Ximenes, Garcia and Yorba. Berdusco was the sixth.

Zamora, plainly the strong man of the sextette, and the leader, had made the revelation. And he surged toward Robusto now, a vast eagerness driving him, his need for the diary holding the finger that pressed against the trigger of the cocked pistol in his hand.

The friar had been first with a gun in his previous encounter with these men. But now the shoe was on the other foot, and it pinched. As Robusto's guns came out, Sixto Yorba made a flying leap, fastened onto his right hand. Ximenes smashed at the friar's left arm, a chopping blow with his gun barrel, which numbed muscles, weakened his grasp.

Robusto dropped the weapons and fought stoutly, wickedly, using every trick he knew. He tore loose, smashed at contorted faces, knocked men down and trampled them. And all the while weak-witted De Osa stood goggling, offering nothing until he could with safety decide which way the battle went.

At one time it looked as if Robusto might win free and dive out the inviting aperture. But they were too many for him. They bore him to the floor by force of numbers, fought him with the ferocity of men made desperate by circumstance, finally subduing him.

Cord was brought and he was trussed behind, hands to feet, like a pig for market. His mind hazed by the beating they had administered, he saw Zamora's gaunt face thrust into his own. "I told you that you would to glad to settle for your skin, mendicant. Now where have you hidden the diary?"

"The price," muttered Robusto, "is still five hundred thousand *pesos de oro.*"

They kicked and beat him. They punished him for an hour, always asking the one vital question. They got no other answer. And they were the first to tire of it. "We waste good time, *compadres,*" growled Zamora finally. "We must get to the mission and search his effects. Once we have that damning work that Altamira was fool enough to pen, then we return to put a fitting end to this stubborn dolt. Lock him up!"

They picked him up, hurled him into a black, stuffy cubby hole, and locked the door on him. And Robusto's regret was not that he had undergone their torment, not that they might happen upon the loose flagstone and secure the prized diary, but only that he had been faced by the surviving five conspirators and had lost his chance. And that, his own life being forfeit, the true heirs of Don Modesto Delfino were forever cheated of their rightful legacy.

Now Robusto was conscious of someone's regular breathing. "Who's that?" he demanded abruptly.

"Juan de Osa, padre," came a meek voice.

"What a fine friend you turned out to be, Juan. Had you lent a hand, I could have subdued those devils. A strong man like you, standing by while one man faced a dozen. . . . shame!"

"A better friend, padre, that your man, Apolonio, and his riders you told me nothing about. You ordered them to tear down the house and kill everybody in it, if we hadn't joined them in five minutes. It's been an hour and there is no sign of them yet. What are they doing, sleeping? *Valgame,* I am a better man that all of them, for I have used my great strength."

Robusto could still twist his battered lips in a smile at this simpleton's naivete. "How have you used your strength, my son?" he asked, as he might have asked a child.

"I have ripped off their cords like they were

threads. When I am ready, I'll smash down the door, get the guns Yorba tossed into a drawer and kill those ungrateful wretches who did not appreciate my taking no part in the fight."

"Good, Juan! Maybe I have misjudged you. Why do you wait? Untie my knots and we'll quit this place."

"Not so fast, padre." De Osa's voice had changed, its friendliness suddenly gone and in its place the sharp, ugly overtones of greed. "First I must have your promise you will give me half the money you handed to Apolonio."

"Certainly, Juan. If Apolonio and his fellows will agree to it."

"You must promise, padre—even if you have to fight them for it. After all, part of it was mine. My price is half now. In a few minutes I shall demand all."

"Very well." Robusto's voice chilled. "Half it is. Now turn me loose."

CHAPTER FOUR

Cassock Justice

OUT at San Gabriel Mission, a firmly stubborn Father Manuel wrangled with Jose Linaries, the genuine *Jefe de Policia* of the Pueblo of Los Angeles. "What makes you believe Friar Robusto has the diary, Señor Linares?"

"I know he has it. He took it from the death room, before a dozen witnesses, knowing when he took it that it incriminated the men he now tries to blackmail. . . ."

"Blackmail? A harsh word, señor. Do these men say Robusto is blackmailing them?"

"For five hundred thousand *pesos de oro*, padre. They have sworn to the authority for his arrest. You saw he's not here, yet you cannot say where he is. Very well. . . ." The official rose purposefully. "I shall turn the fellow up if I have to search every foot of this layout."

"You have a warrant of search, Señor Jefe?"

"I have not, but that shall not halt me. You are in trouble enough with the State now, Father, without trying to furnish sanctuary in a flagrant case like this. Just think! Five hundred thousand *peso de oro.*"

"I am thinking, señor." The ghost of a smile played around the Father Superior's wrinkled lips. "Five hundred thousand. . . . A tidy sum, *Señor Jefe.* I want no more trouble with the civil authorities. Come; we go to Robusto's cubicle."

He led the way down the long corridor, wearily and with the feebleness which had been growing on him and restricting his activities these last six months. He made a light and stood back to watch the official search. Trained to the ways of those who secrete things professionally, he was not long in discovering and lifting out the loose flagstone. A laugh shook him as he emptied the cache. "An interesting collection, Father. Very interesting. This Robusto must be quite a fellow. Ha, a pocketed belt! Those pockets will bear looking into. And the diary!"

Opening the little red book, he rose and stepped over to the light, his eyes avidly reading what was written there. And Father Manuel prayed for a friar he had come to suspect and, even while wrestling with suspicion, had leaned heavily upon, physically and spiritually. He was roused by a tumult at the mission entrance—loud voices, protests of one of the lay brothers. Then five men came striding hurriedly down the corridor. Zamora, in the lead, was followed by Yorba and Ximenes, Garcia and Berdusco.

"Ah, Father Manuel." Zamora paused. "Sorry to force our way past that unreasonable fellow, but we came on business that must not be put aside. This fellow Friar Robusto—"

"Has the red-backed diary taken from Flores Altamira's bedside," finished the Father Superior, wearily. "I know. I'm tired of hearing about the matter. In here. . . ." he pointed into the cubicle, "you will find what you seek."

Zamora's face lighted covetously as he stepped past the priest and entered the small room. Juan Linares, rousing from his intent perusal of the contents of the little red book, lifted his glance. Julio Zamora halted, muttering a curse. *"Por Dios,* you, *Jefe?"*

"Yes," said the official. "Are you surprised, Señor Zamora? When I am empowered with a warrant of search, I do my duty. . . . quickly." He beamed with pardonable pride, tapping the diary. "I have here the little book which has set up such a furor, and a very interesting document I find it. No wonder you rascals want it so badly."

"I'll thank you to give it to me, *Jefe,"* snapped Zamora, icily.

THE official started, noticing then that the others had moved inside to stand beside the lawyer. Ximenes and Garcia held bared guns pointed at his middle. He paled and then flushed as anger displaced his sudden fear. "You ask too much, Zamora. My duty is plain; first I must file it with the judge who signed the warrant. You will have to take the matter up with him."

"Hand it over," barked Zamora, "or you'll not leave the mission alive!"

"Say the word," growled Ximenes, "and I'll blow him in two, Zamora."

"You threaten the *Jefe de Policia?"* cried Linares. "You know what that means, señores."

"It means you hand over that book or die, Linares. And all witnesses to this forever hold their peace or they too shall die. . . . unhappily." The lawyer moved toward the nervous *Jefe*. "Kill him, Ximenes, if he has not handed me the book in ten seconds."

"You leave me no choice, señores," whined Linares, and passed the diary to Julio Zamora.

"You profane the mission," mourned Father Manuel.

"And to what end?" demanded a voice, and a figure stepped past the Father Superior, pausing behind the intruders, a leveled pistol in each hand. They spun to the dangerous challenge in his voice and gasped. They were looking at one who was a legend of terror in the Californias—a man in a battered black hat, wearing a flowing black cape and the striped, full-face mask that men everywhere had come to fear.

They recoiled from him.

"El Salteador Espectro!" breathed Zamora, white-faced. "The Phantom Highwayman!"

"Dios save us!" muttered Sixto Yorba.

"The same God," added Father Manuel, bitterly, "whose sanctuary you scorned, only minutes ago."

"What would you have here?" demanded Enrique Ximenes, only one of the intruders who seemed to possess his wonted poise and cunning.

The bandit's flashing eyes lanced Julio Zamora. "The red book which connects you all, fatally, with the legalized robbery of the Delfino heirs, señores. And quickly, for I am an impatient man."

Zamora hesitated, with the eyes of his fellows upon him. The Highwayman seemed fully engrossed with him and that was the invitation awaited. He swayed forward, whipping out his *pistola. "Fuego, companeros!"* he screamed. "Fire! I have the *demonio."*

The right-hand gun of El Salteador spat flame and lead. Ximenes, hit squarely under the breast bone, gasped, stumbled and pitched to the flagstones, dead. The left-hand gun of the Highwayman waved menacingly before the others and his fiercely hot eyes held a lethal invitation. "One more shot, Señores, and you have me. Who shall it strike down?"

No one moved or spoke. They stared at him in the heavy fascination of terror. Seconds ticked away, with no sound save the quickened breathing of men and the soft slap of *guaraches* in the corridor as frightened lay brothers retreated. At last, almost like a man in a trance, Julio Zamora extended the red-backed book with a hand that shook with a palsy. The bandit thrust it inside his cape and backed slowly toward the door, where Father Manuel's lips moved silently in prayer.

"Gracias, senores," said El Salteador Espectro, and waved his smoking pistol at the corpse on the floor. "You are pitying him now, no? A misplaced emotion, I assure you. Unless you take care of the Delfino heirs and right the wrong you have done, you will each of you come to envy him. Do you understand me?"

HE expected no answer and got none. He seemed to glide through the open doorway and was gone. They stood frozen there, listening for his footsteps in the corridor, hearing nothing. Presently the Father Superior sighed. "If there is nothing more, my sons . . ."

It broke the spell. Sixto Yorba turned to the *Jefe de Policia,* who had made no move nor sound. "A fine administrator of the law," he taunted. "You stand there like a stick, let the most wanted man in California enter the room, rob us and depart. And you do not lift your voice or a finger."

"He did." Linares pointed grimly at Ximenes. "I had no more chance against him than you did, and you know it. Señores, I put a value upon my life."

"Hark!" warned Father Manuel. "Can he be coming back?"

Somewhere a door had banged open. Voices filled the hallway, describing to someone who had just arrived the visit of *El Salteador Espectro.* And then a lusty voice answered: "That inhuman monster? God deliver us! Father Manuel? Did that *bandito* molest our beloved Superior?"

The voices had grown louder and the *ricos* exchanged astonished glances. Friar Robusto, his face cut and bruised from his encounter with these same *ricos,* appeared in the doorway, most of the mission personnel behind him—cassocked men openly relieved and emboldened by the appearance of the friar they had each come to lean heavily upon in times of stress.

Robusto's eyes were busy. He looked at the dead man, at the other crushed and disorganized *ricos.* Lastly, he eyed the misplaced flagstone, from which had come the damning diary. A faint smile grew on his lips and then he threw an arm about the stooped shoulders of the Father Superior.

"The Phantom Highwayman, eh?" he asked. "He found my secret vault. The red book is gone. He took it away?"

"Yes, my son. And the mission is cleaner for its going."

"But no," smiled the friar, and walked to his pallet. He kicked up one corner and lifted out another red book, precisely like the first. "I suspected that these men who worship Mammon. . . ." he swept his hand toward the *ricos,* "would try something of the kind. So I hid that worthless red diary where they would be

most apt to find it. These covers hold their evidence of villiany." He faced the writhing *ricos*. "Senores, we continue our talk from the point where I was interrupted by your guns, your fists and your boots. You wish to buy a diary. I have one for sale. It is too bad Ximenes died, for now you must pay his share."

"How. . . . how much?" croaked Zamora in a feeble voice.

"One hundred and twenty-five thousand *pesos de oro* from each of you four."

"Imbecile!" snapped the lawyer. "We haven't that much in gold."

"Let it then be wealth, señores. You have it, with much to spare—cash, live-stock, lands, buildings, notes and stores of goods. It matters not, for the poor *paisanos* you dispossessed of the Delfino Ranch can use whatever you have, or sell it. Zamora, you are a lawyer, with knowledge of how to write an iron-clad *carta de paga*. Make the promise to pay include your interest in the Delfino Grant. Yonder is quill and paper."

Zamora mumbled, "This is extortion."

"It is your chance," broke in Father Manuel, "to escape the vengeance of *El Salteador Espectro*. Remember, my sons? He said you must take care of the Delfino heirs."

"Write it, Julio," ordered Yorba, and Zamora obeyed. For minutes the cubicle echoed only to the faint scratching of the quill. Finishing, he appended his signature, called the others forward to affix theirs. At Robusto's suggestion, Diego Delgado, one of Ximenes' warriors, and Jefe Linares, signed as witnesses. Robusto scanned the document briefly, nodded, and handed over the diary. A moment later only Robusto and the Father Superior were in the cubicle.

"Did you hear what Linares said to me as he left, my son?"

"A weak character, Padre, whose utterances carry little weight. What did he say?"

"That in his opinion, you and El Salteador are one and the same."

ROBUSTO rose slowly, wearily. Maybe Linares was smarter than he had believed.

"An amazing deduction, Padre. Should I be flattered or outraged? Against such calumny I can only pit my piety. Is it not enough?"

"Plenty, my son, though you are clever enough to carry off the deception. That trick of the two diaries was cunning. Confess now; which of them contained the evidence?"

"Neither, Padre. The one from beneath the stone was the true diary of Flores Altamira, but it contained nothing of an incriminatory nature. Altamira was far too smart for that. The rest should have been smart enough to deduce that I had merely dropped the hint of written confession to learn the true identity of the six who stole the Delfino Grant."

"Will they not make trouble for you, my son?" asked Father Manuel, "when they learn the trick you have played upon them?"

"They should not learn, Padre. I spent long, weary hours writing the fictitious diary for which they have just paid five hundred thousand *pesos de oro*. They will read it and damn their one-time friend, Flores Altamira, and each other. For that work of mine contains evidences of treachery and counter treachery which will split them apart for all time, and perhaps even set them at one another's throats."

He pressed the paper into Father Manuel's gnarled hands, and with it the money he had dropped outside the window at the Yorba house. "A little donation to the mission, Padre," he said, "from one who would have paid me twice the amount to waylay and slay that gay friar, Robusto."

It took the aged priest a minute to get the point. When he had done so, he let a laugh fall from his lips and embraced the friar. "Justice has been done, my son, and let us pray that *El Señor Dios* approves of this means to justify the end. I think it is sometimes good that there is a bit of the rogue in a holy man—for the greater glory of His Kingdom," he added piously.

THE END

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A Dime Western
Short-Short Story

His right hand swished past holster an' came up filled.

LIGHTNIN' STRIKES TWICE!

By CHARLES HANDLEY

Lightnin' Galloway made it a point never to strike twice in the same place.... Until that night of red violence and gunflame in Benton, when he had to stage one last, bloody encore!

TOO much work an' no play sometimes ends in a killin' which is the reason I chanced bringin' Lightnin' Galloway an' John Marshall into Benton.

We had made a mess of a bank job in Little Mesa a few weeks before an' three of my boys had been knocked out've their kaks like ducks on a shootin' gallery rack. I figured on holin' up for a couple of months, but Lightnin' begin to let his imagination get the best of him again an' it was either a question of lettin' him blow off steam or of gettin' rid of him. In my business a ranny with an active imagination is like a kid with a barrel of black powder.

We tied the ponies at the hitch rail in front of the general store where it was plenty dark and took a pasear down the plank walk to sort of look things over. Most of the saloons was on the other side of the street.

Like I expected, Lightnin' picked out one by the sounds of the most hell-raisin' an' headed toward it. I started to follow, but John Mar-

shall hit out at an angle toward another saloon called the Mint.

"Where in hell do you think you're goin'?" Lightnin' snapped at John.

"I might find an' old friend of mine at the Mint," John replied. "I'll be there when you get ready to leave."

When John was out of earshot, Lightnin' said, "That Little Mesa job did somethin' to him. He's gettin' bats in his belfry. For the past week he's been talking' about a man's conscience, the laws of retribution, an' other sky pilot nonsense. He's crackin' up if I know anything about it."

I figgered if anyone was goin' to get the jumpin' jitters it'd be Lightnin', but I didn't say so. John was a whole lot like his name. Ordinarily you'd call a young feller Johnny or Jack an' reserve John until he was past the middle mark, but he insisted on bein' called John an' it seemed to fit him like the hide on a beef critter.

After a few rounds of drinks I could see that Lightnin' was still on the prod. "How about buckin' the tiger for a while?" I said.

He shook his head. "I don't like the idea of John leavin' us like he did. He didn't tell us he was ever in Benton before. We don't know him too well, either. What if he got ideas of sellin' us out for the reward money? If he's gone yellow, like I think he has, he could save his neck an' get a coupla thousand dollars for doin' it. Let's go down to the Mint."

John was standin' by the bar with ten glasses lined up in front of him when we come in. The bottle of private stock was two-thirds empty an' the barkeep was grinnin' like a Cheshire cat.

John's voice was already a little thick. "Belly up, boys," he said. "Fats, here, was one of us till he made enough money to buy this place. He owes me a thousand quarts an' he's ready to pay off."

Lightnin' took a drink an' smacked his lips. "That's what I call good likker. I didn't think they made it now-days."

"This is Sid Skeflin an' Lightnin' Galloway, Fats," John said with a wide grin. "They're used to drinkin' what's shoved out."

The apron grinned appreciatively, then glanced at a nearby wall and back again. The smile left his wide face an' he said in a low voice. "That ranny sittin' over near the wall seems to be takin' an interest in what's goin' on. You fellows know him?"

I took a look at the hombre. He was staring directly at me an' made no move to hide it. He did look sort've familiar. I figgered he might have recognized my name when John introduced us to the barkeep. I didn't like the dead-pan look he gave me, but I reasoned if he had anything on his chest he'd get it off.

"He's got his eyes on me," John whispered. "If he starts any ruckus, I'll finish it."

LIGHTNIN' stiffened. The glass dropped out of his hand and banged against a brass spittoon. "It's me he's starin' at! I've had a flash glimpse of that mug somewhere before. I'll place him in a minute."

Five men came into the saloon and lined up at the bar. I could danged near smell the difference in Lightnin' as he shifted his challenging, beady eyes from the juniper by the wall to the newcomers, an' then back again.

"Easy does it, kid," I whispered. "Don't let that danged imagination of your'n get us into a trap."

I could see the sweat ooze out on his forehead below his hat band. I stuck a drink into his gun hand for safe measure.

"I never saw you so pale behind the gills before, Lightnin'," John said under his breath. "Maybe we'd best stick our tails between our legs an' git, huh?"

"Go yellow if you want to," Lightnin' grunted. "I'm seein' it out."

The men at the bar had a couple of drinks and left. Lightnin' downed a couple of quick ones, but he kept his eyes on the galoot who was still starin' at us.

The barkeep walked down the counter to clear the empty glasses. I saw him grin an' I figgered he was sort've laughin'up his sleeve over the way we had tightened up when those jigadees had all filed in.

Suddenly Lightnin' rubbed his hands together, laughed nervously an' grabbed another drink. "I just figgered it out, fellers. That hombre over by the wall is lookin' for some more of the same medicine I gave him once before. He was workin' over a desk when I did a little bank job about five years ago an' I had to gun-whip him some. I thought I'd seen him before. Now we'll get this little chore over an' go on with our fun."

Lightnin' took a couple of steps toward the man. "Sort've think you recognize my face, don't you, mister?"

"No, I don't." The fellow got up from his chair.

I knew he was lyin' because of the sudden tightenin' of his lips an' the way his eyelids begin to blink. He had on store clothes with no six-shooter in sight an' I figgered he was gettin' set to go for a hide-out gun.

"You're a liar!" Lightnin' taunted him. "You recognized me the minute I come in here an' you've been waitin' for a chance to get the drop on me."

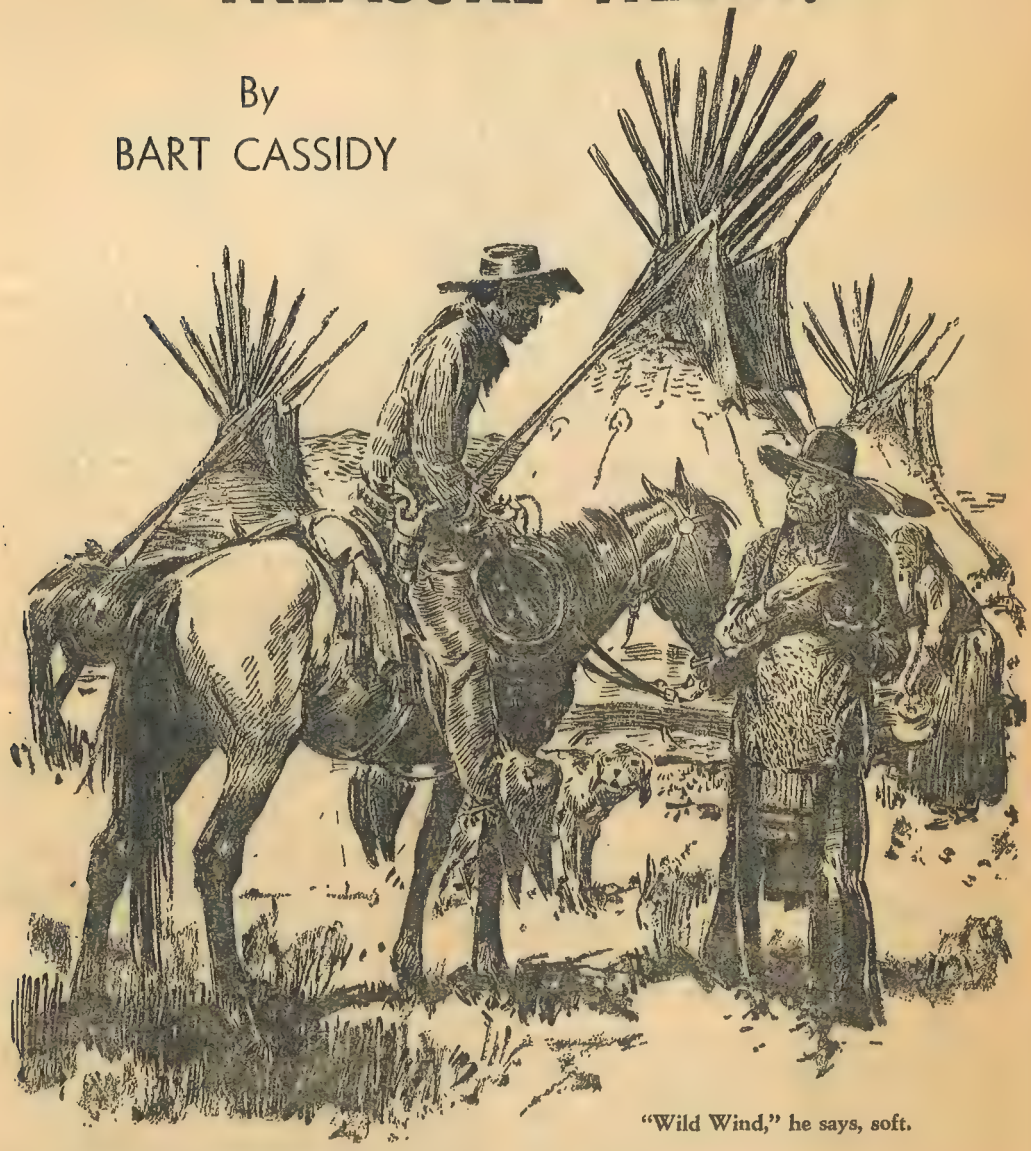
"I still say I didn't recognize your face," the fellow insisted, "but I've been waiting for five years to hear that voice again!"

"Better take it easy, Lightnin'," John warned in a low voice. "He's blind."

(Please turn to page 97)

TENSLEEP GUARDS THE TREASURE TRAIN!

By
BART CASSIDY



"Wild Wind," he says, soft.

When an unexpected golconda of half a million in gold was shoved into Tensheep's lap, that horse-loving fugitive drew the dead man's hand in a risky whip-saw game that could win him only a nameless prairie grave. . . .

WITHOUT bein' in the least what you'd call a Injun lover—seein' it was the Sioux that killed my dad—I never was so glad to see anything in my life as that Gros Ventre village loomin' up in the dusk. I'm so tired I'm sick. My stummick thinks my throat's cut. Glory Hawss is tender-hoofed from ridge runnin' an' plumb beat. Somewhere along my back-trail, an' not too far back, is Sheriff Causey Barfoot of Custer County,

Montana, who don't pay no more attention to a county line than a antelope does to a barb wire fence.

What made Barfoot so sore—but never mind that. He's got a hard-ridin', reckless shootin' posse behind him an' he's dead-set on writin' me off as a thorn in the side of Montana law. An' me, I'm more content to be a human coyote than a gallows bird or a serial number behind gray stone walls.

Squaws is messin' around their cookin' pots, their fires lookin' cheery an' welcomin'. A swarm of wild-lookin' dogs come tearin' out at me, yelpin' around Glory's hoofs like they was starved for meat. A Injun woman raises a yell. Kids duck into the faded an' ragged canvas teepees. Men lay aside their pipes, get to their feet an' sorta drift together. I ride up to them, light off, stagger an' ketch myself.

"Twenty-Hawks?" I croak. "He around?"

"Here!" sounds a low voice, an' the chief steps out from the shadow of a teepee. He's tall, straight as a ramrod, every inch the proud red man the books tell about. An' he's got his hand on the butt of a businesslike revolver stuck in his waist band. "Who wants Twenty Hawks?"

"It's Tensleep, Jo-Ned."

He sucks in a great breath, an' leaps forward to take my hand. He's beamin' all over as he shakes. Some say a Injun don't show emotion; don't believe it. There's joy wrote all over him an' tears in his eyes. The Jo-Ned done it. That's the name they put onto him when he went to school at Rosebud, when him an' me was sorta side pardners. We could outride, out-rope, out-run an' out-fight any of the boys at the school. Many's the big plans we made for ourselfs before we had learned it's a dog-eat-dog world an' no vegetarians.

"Wild Wind," he says, soft. "You bring a moment of joy to a heavy heart. My teepee is yours. Come!" He claps his hands, barks an order, an' leads me into his teepee. His woman looks at me sorta sidelin', bows her head, an' goes out. Twenty-Hawks motions to a pile of robes an' I set down. "Your horse," he says, "will be taken to a safe place and rubbed clean. Food will be brought for you and then you can tell me why you travel so fast and hard. . . ."

"Doubt if there's time for that, Jo-Ned. Sheriff Causey Barfoot is on my trail, not more'n two-three miles behind. If you can give me a bite, I'll be headin' out again, though my pony's run plumb off at the legs."

He half smiles an' stands back as a woman fetches in a steamin' bowl of soupy stew that tastes better'n anything ever did before. Stew-meat's scarce in these parts an' I'm hopin' the critter wore a cloven hoof as I down it. Three bowls of that I put down before comin' up for air. An' only then does he bother me with talk.

"There will be a shot," he says, "if the sheriff rides toward my village. In that case you will crawl into these robes and pull them over your head. You'll be as safe here as anywhere. Ah-h-h!" He starts as the echo of a shot strikes through the dusk. Twenty Hawks motions me under the robes an' goes outside.

FOR what seems a long time I can catch the murmur of voices, upraised as if in anger, an' the restless thudding of hoofs. Scairt Ol' Causey will search the teepees, so I lay there with my gun in my hand an' my runnin' legs drawed up beneath me. Which means I lack the proper confidence in Twenty Hawks' gift uh gab—something that distinguished him from all the rest at Rosebud. But he outtalks the sheriff an' sends him spurrin' northward, an' a minute later he's pullin the robes off my sweatin' carcass.

"Gone," he says. "He won't come back, my friend."

"Wisht I was as sure," I answed, wry. "Causey's got a head on his shoulders. I better be shovin' on, Jo-Ned. Maybe I can do as much for you some day."

He don't smile. "Nobody can do much for the Granite Creek Gros Ventres, Wild Wind. Our race is run. For many summers our teepees have risen on this ground. For this our braves have died, fighting the cruel raiders of the Sioux, Cheyenne and Crow. The buffalo vanished and the government restricted our lands—both hard blows, but we lived over them. Now a man comes among us tapping the rocks with a little hammer. He says there is oil. The government sells us out. Day after tomorrow my people ride to Riverview, where each will make his mark and receive one thousand dollars. After that, we move to our new lands—barren badlands beyond the river."

"How many in your tribe, Jo-Ned?"

"All told, about five hundred."

"Whee-ew!" I whistle. "A cool half million! That's attract big crooks, Jo-Ned, like molasses attracts flies."

Twenty-Hawks shrugs, "What matter, Wild Wind? The game is gone. Our beloved lands are taken away. The money will soon be spent. Indians will disappear; as the buffalo did. The dream medicine is bad for the Gros Ventre."

He's the most disgusted Indian I ever saw an' I can't say I blame him. I do my best, but there ain't no place to start consolin' him. Everything he's said is true, an' a lot more beside, if the smell in my nostrils ain't foolin' me plenty. So after awhile I shake his hand; I promise I'll be back an' ride off. Glory has been sponged an' rubbed an'—no foolin'—grained. He acts like a different horse, an' I feel like a different man.

It's sorta late when I hit Riverview, county seat of Pine County. It looks like quite a little place, with mebby more than the usual sprinklin' of saloons. One plainly tops all the rest, for size an' noise. So, when I've stabled Glory, I walk into the busy Legal Tender, dazzled a little by the glitter of brass an' crystal an' the size of the crowd.

By the time I reach the long bar, I can hear the chimin' of my own spurs an' feel silence hem me in. I order Monogram an' I'm sippin' it when I venture a glance at the gent on my right. He's eyein' me hostile, his hand on his gun. At the same instant the gent on my left starts edgin' t'rds me along the rail. Cripes! What is this?

Poker-faced, I pay for the drink and turn to eye the gamblin' layout. An' there comin' to'rds me—squat, heavy-set an' brute-jawed—is a sheriff. No, not Causey Barfoot nor nothin' like him. Causey's stubborn as a mule, but beside this gent he looks like a preacher.

The lawman plants himself before me, eyein' me up an' down with open scorn. "I'm Sheriff Oble Haggett," he announces, so's everybody can hear. "Who in hell might you be?"

A showman an' grand-stander, I think to myself, an' breathe easier. "Me?" I yelp, actin' surprised. "Why, I'm one of the three Jones boys—Anvil, Bellows an' myself, Sledge. True chips offa the anvil of our late pappy—Chestnut Tree Jones. You've heard of him, shorely."

His red-trimmed eyes glitter an' he ignores my question. "Sledge Jones, eh? How's this fer a hammer." An' with no further warnin', he fetches one offa the floor an' crashes my chin, knockin' me back against the gent who was drinkin' on my right. That feller smashes me in the kidney, drivin' me against the gent who was on my left. He plasters me one on the jaw, knockin' me sprawlin', my lights flickerin'. Groggily, I set up, blinkin' up at them.

"Now what's yore name?" demands the sheriff.

"Tackhammer Jones," I say, meek.

"I'm plumb fed up with you desperators driftin' into my town with hungry pockets. Don't let the sun shine on you in Riverview or I'll lock you in my hoosegow an' throw the key away. You savvy?" An' when I nod, he adds: "Come on, boys," an' leads his two deppities out of the place.

I PULL myself onto my legs, weavin' an' groggy. Everybody's starin' at me. Every eye is unfriendly except those of a smooth-lookin' gent settin' at a corner table, playin' solitaire. He's grinnin' an' he jerks an invite with his head. I stagger over, pull out a chair an' set down. He pours me a drink an' I never needed one worse.

"Things ain't as bad as they seem, Tensleep," he says, soft. "Not if you use your think tank."

"Done used it for a punchin' bag already," I complain. "That's bad enough."

"Oble Haggett's a playful cuss," he says, "but not really a bad sort. He's a good friend uh mine an' I'll speak to him an' fix things up, if—"

My heart sinks but I act interested, knowin' I'm in a bad fix. "What's the if?" I ask. He takes time to tell me he's Faro Ben, house gambler, then adds: "I got a little deal comin' up, Tensleep, an' I need a good man to fill my hand. A man I could trust would feather his nest an' be as good as an ace to me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Can't tell you who's involved but the game stacks up something like this. There's a government man here, hand-nursing a cool half million in a local bank."

"I'm afraid that's outa my depth," I tell him. "My line's horses, not banks."

"I know. We're not planning to rob the bank. This money will be paid out to a lousy bunch uh Nitchies, day after tomorrow. Sale of reservation lands, you understand? The Indians will trade some, fill up on forty-rod whiskey an' pull out for the badlands, haulin' most of the money in a spring wagon. They'll pass through Granite Gulch about dark or a little after. That's where the sky will fall on 'em. You interested?"

He mistakes my interest for enthusiasm, which is the way I want it. Then he tells me I'll rate a couple thousand out of the haul an' save myself the trouble of facin' the trumped-up murder charge that's been hangin' over my head for ten years. He tells me to meet him here a little after noon tomorrow for my instructions. After that we shake hands an' I quit the Legal Tender, pretty much excited an' gropin' in the dark. I've got to get word to Twenty-Hawks, but first I've gotta get some shut-eye. I'm about wore out an' it looks like I've got better'n a whole day to work things out.

But here's one case where looks is plumb deceivin'. After lookin' at Glory Hawss, I head for the Commercial House, cravin' a good night's sleep. The clerk swings the register an' hands me a pen. An' there in letters uh fire, like the Law uh Moses on the Rock, is the name of Sheriff Causey Barfoot. Him an' his posse, accordin' to the clerk, is bedded down upstairs, dead to this world after chasin' some desperate character named Tensleep Maxon over half of Montana. Holy cow!

I mumble something an' climb the stairs to my room, where I set holdin' my achin' head, rackin' my brains. It's midnight when an idea comes out of the fog. I shove out into the hall, pausin' before Room 21, which is Barfoot's. It's unlocked an' I enter. Causey's

hoein' it down, snorin' like a wood-burnin' locomotive. Gently, I tiptoe to the window, pull the shade an' light the lamp. I've got the muzzle of my cutter in Causey's neck when I get him awake.

"Wh . . . whut's up?" he demands, then his eyes grow wide an' big. "Tensleep Maxon, by godfrey!" He sets up. "All I gotta do, Tensleep, is to raise a holler an' fetch down a posse that'd rather have your hide than gold money."

"All I gotta do, Causey," I remind him, "is to drop this hammer an' blow you to Kingdom Come. You willin' to listen to reason?"

"Mebbyso yes an' mebbyso no," he says, noncommittal. "What is it?"

I start at the beginnin', tellin' him all I know about the government payment to the Injuns. Then I give him all the humiliatin' details of my half hour in the Legal Tender. "Twenty Hawks is my friend, Sheriff," I wind up. "I gotta help him. You gotta help me help him an' his people. With me an' your posse ambushin' the ambushers, we'll prevent a great wrong an' you'll get the man you're after—namely, me."

He clamps his jaws, stubborn. "There's something to what you say, Tensleep, but first off I can't make any sort of a deal with an outlaw on the loose. Toss that gun on the bed an' let me put the come-alongs on an' then we can talk business."

"Do I look like I was born yesterday, Sheriff?" I demand. "Or do you think I'm tetched?"

He shrugs. "Take it or leave it, Tensleep. An' remember this—the longer you run me around, the harder it'll go with you."

"Nothin's harder than a gallows-strap, Barfoot," I snap, an' start backin' out. "I shoulda knowed I couldn't do decent, honest business with a mule-eared bounty-hunter like you. Don't stick yore head outa this hotel or I'll blow it off."

DOWNSTAIRS I go, three steps at a time. Behind me Sheriff Barfoot's voice is rousin' the posse an' I can just see him stumblin' into his clothes. Now I'm between the devil an' the deep water, for the only warnin' Faro Ben gave me was not to try to leave town. I'm thinkin' of this as I pound down the alley to the stable. I haven't made up my mind when I wheel into the stall, squeeze past snortin' Glory Hawss an' back against—a gun. Cripes!

A hate-thickened voice croaks: "Wild Wind, you take the hand of the Gros Ventre in friendship. You eat Gros Ventre meat. You hide from sheriff in Gros Ventre lodge. After

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all this, you betray Gros Ventre friendship and plan to rob our people. The tribal elders meet to pass judgment. And so you die."

That muzzle pressure increases an' I gulp. "Who says I betrayed the Gros Ventre?" I ask.

"Twenty-Hawks."

"Where'd he get it?"

"From Sheriff Haggett. He ride out to tell us."

There it is! Oble Haggett knowed who I was when he floored me. Whee-ew! The fix I'm in, mebby the easiest way out is to invite this redskin to jerk the trigger prong. But life's sweet even to a cornered coyote an' I'm toughin' it out. "Haggett wants me, dead or alive," I tell the Injun. "He knows if you kill me, he'll not only collect the bounty on *my* pelt but he'll have lulled the Gros Ventre into a sense of false security. Then when him an' his plug-uglies jump your people in Granite Gulch, you'll be wide open an' easy prey."

The Injun says nothin' an' the pressure of that gun gets stronger in my back. It's a bitter pill to swaller, knowin' the sheriff's in on the deal an' due to come clean because of the kind of a reputation I tote around with me. An' Faro Ben, him that was gonna speak to Haggett in my behalf. He spoke to him all right, the buzzard.

I'm bracin' myself for the crushin', blastin' shock of a bullet when the pressure eases. "You tell truth?" asks the Gros Ventre.

"An' nothin' but the truth," I tell him. "If you just gotta kill me, go tell Twenty Hawks that his friend said to send a wagon through the gulch with dummies on it, an' no gold. Tell him to have his braves riding the ridge to clean out the polecats set to jump you. Now go ahead an' jerk that trigger."

The Injun must be halfway convinced, for suddenly that gun ain't jabbin' my back no longer. I step aside, whirl an' chop down on the Gros Ventre's gun arm, all in one swift move. The gun thuds to the ground. The Injun grapples me an' I chill him with a short uppercut to the chin. He sags against the manger.

"You kill me now," he grunts.

"No," I tell him. "Get your horse an' ride to Twenty-Hawks. Tell him what I said. Send that money horseback, by secret trails. Start the wagon through the gulch with dummies on it. An' when them coyotes jump it, gun them down."

"Gros Ventre not have many guns."

"Use what you've got. There won't be many against you 'cause they don't want to have to divide it too many ways. Now get along."

He whisks out of the stall an' is gone like a ghost. I reach for Glory's saddle but before I can lift it down, Causey Barfoot's men enter the stable, manhuntin'. While they're wakin' an' questionin' the hostler, I crawl into the manger, pull hay over me an' wait for Nature to take its course.

They come into Glory's stall an' get so close they can strike his muzzle with me not three foot away, holdin' my breath. After a while they leave the barn an' the town quiets. I fall asleep an' when I wake up, Causey an' his whole posse are in the barn, saddlin' up an' swearin' by all the big gods an' little 'uns they'll cut my sign an' run me down if it takes all the rest of the summer. They thunder away, leavin' one man staked out to watch Glory Hawss, which they seem to think I've run off an' left.

AFTER they're gone, the stake-out decides another plate of ham an' eggs won't do him no harm nor me no good, so off he goes. Me, I crawl outta my cramped quarters an' cripple down back alleys to the rear of the Legal Tender. I curl up in the barrel room an' sleep some more. Along about noon, plenty refreshed an' hungry as a wolf, I slip out to a lunch room, fill up, an' amble back to meet that snaky Faro Ben, pickin' my teeth.

"Now here's the layout, Tensleep," he grins, friendly as hell an' twice as faithless. He picks up his solitaire an' lays out the cards, doodlin' with the pips as he talks. "I've spoke to Oble Haggett an' he trusts you all the way. You earn a nice spot. You an' two gunnies will ride the north ridge. Another trusted man will have two killers on the south side. That's too many men to trust with a secret like that, an' to split with, you savvy?"

"Slaughter them along with the Nitchies, eh?" I ask, tough.

"You're catchin' on, Tensleep. Salivate them two you'll be ridin' with an' you'll collect four thousand instead of two—pretty big money for one evening's work."

"Big?" I lift my brows. "Who gets the other four hundred an' ninety-two thousand—you an' Haggett?"

It makes him mad an' he glares at me. "Say the word if you're not satisfied, Maxon. I thought I was doin' you a favor, but if you don't think so, say the word an' I'll let Oble Haggett do his stuff on you. What you say?"

"Don't get me wrong, Ben," I say, hurried. "I ain't kickin'. Just curious as to who's gonna be worth that kind uh money when the shootin' dies down. What's next?"

"I don't need to tell you that Sheriff Barfoot's snoopin' around these parts, lookin' for a certain well-known horse thief. Lay low in that back room, second door on the right. I'll have your meals sent in an' tomorrow night we'll take us a ride."

Rememberin' Causey Barfoot, I'm content to let it ride like that. There's a soft bed in

the room an' I sure pound my ear, sleepin' most of the afternoon, all that night an' off an' on durin' the mornin'. Only time I rouse is to eat the good grub Faro Ben sends in.

Shortly after noon Ben comes in, grinnin' from ear to ear. With him is five mangy-lookin' gun-slingers. Two, Cotton-eye an' Bucktooth Bill, is assigned to foller me. Two others are to look to the lead of a wicked-eyed little gent called Cigareet.

"Everything shapes up perfect," enthuses Faro Ben. "The Nitchies have been paid off an' already they've drunk more'n is good for 'em—I seen to that. They'll soon be pullin' out, which will be our cue to take a little ride around 'em. You've all got your orders"—he looks at me meanin'ful—"an' I don't expect no slip-up anywhere."

"Sheriff Barfoot?" I ask, nervous.

Faro Ben laughs. "That weasel? Him an' his men have rode out, even takin' the boy they had watchin' your pony, Tensleep. Looks like he's give it up, which if he hadn't Oble Haggett would have invited him to chase himself back to his own county. Nothin' to worry about." He rubs his hands together, beamin'. "The bacon's as good as ours, boys."

He may be right, at that. It's plain Sheriff Barfoot has refused to take cards in helpin' the Gros Ventre, which leaves it up to me an' Twenty-Hawks, with the Injuns none too well supplied with fightin' tools. The only cause for rejoicin' is that Faro Ben an' Oble Haggett ain't apt to make the haul they're expectin'. All the sign points to this bein' my cue to duck out an' slope for far places. An' that's what's in my mind as me an' Cotton-eye an' Bucktooth Bill ride through the dusk for Granite Gulch. But they're watchin' me like a hawk, an' I can only draw the conclusion that each of them an' every man involved has been given the same orders—to rub out the rest so as to narrow down the split. Ben an' Oble is figgerin' to have that whole half million for themselves.

We swing a wide circle, travelin' fast, around the movin' Injuns. With darkness fallin', we top the ridge an' haul up at one of the few places where the cliffs break into steep rock slides into the canyon. There we set our ponies, waitin' for the ball to open.

The light fades to a thin line in the west. Little noises echo across the gulch. Across the way Cigareet an' his two men are waitin', each with his own ideas of treachery. Somewhere in the gulch, Faro Ben an' Oble Haggett, with an unknown number of men, are set to spring their trap. An' still no sound of the Gros Ventres as minutes drag into an hour.

I BEGIN to see a glimmer of humor in the situation. Maybe Twenty-Hawks has played it close to his vest, abandoning the spring wagon an' makin' his move through Elk Horn Pass—travelin' fifty miles out of his way to avoid trouble. What a joke that would be on these human scavengers . . . an' me left alone to face their anger.

Another half hour passes an' Bucktooth Bill shoves his horse over to where I'm settin' Glory. "Somethin's gone wrong," he mutters. "Reckon somebody tipped off them damn' Nitchies?"

"Looks thataway," puts in Cottoneye, closin' in. "It's what we get for cuttin' in a stranger that hadn't worked with us before. You have any partic'lar reason fer steerin' them Injuns away from this trap, Maxon?" My hand is on my gun an' I'm thinkin' up the proper answer to that 'un when Cottoneye barks: "Hark!"

"The wagon," snaps Bucktooth Bill. "They're comin'. Spread out to swoop down on 'em, men!"

They pull away from me then, one on either side, like they're anxious for the screen of night to hide their plans for slaughterin' me. Glory's snortin' an' nervous an' I hold him under tight rein until Cottoneye an' Bucktooth are beyond my sight. Then I put my critter down the slope, easy-like, lettin' him pick the way.

Already things are happenin' in the gulch an' across the way. Somewhere a hoarse yell beats up: "Bullets for Nitchies! Burn 'em down!"

That's Oble Haggett, an' he's not too far off. "Compliments of Tackhammer Jones!" I yell, an' shake out a couple of slugs, hopin' they'll reach his bulky carcass. Instantly I'm bracketed by fire from above, both sides. Cottoneye an' Bucktooth Bill are out to earn that extra two thousand, never suspectin' that they're doomed by the same order they're follerin'.

Bullets whistle around me, too many for the guns of that unholy pair. Short, sharp yells drift down from the ridge an' when I turn my head back I see the line of muzzle-bursts against the sky. The braves of Twenty-Hawks are blastin' their answer to treachery. An' I'm caught in a fire of my own buildin'! I pull my head down to the withers an' send Glory Hawss jumpin' into the gulch where the night has come alive with fire an' lead.

Across the canyon, gun-flashes are pimpling the blackness an' there too the bulk of the gunplay is on top, where the Gros Ventres are cruisin'. A death scream comes tumblin' into the bottom, where lances of crimson flame radiate like spokes of a wheel to a wagon drawn by terrified, stampedin' ponies.

My main problem now is to get out of the trap without gettin' burnt, an' my only chance is down the gulch. An' between, where shadows seem to pile up, guns are speakin' at the wagon. A figure rears up before me, and a

gun muzzle belches flame in my face. I jerk the prong of my cutter an' Glory rides the man down. A bullet burns across the point of my shoulder. I drive two shots at the flash, with doubtful results, an' stick Glory with the spurs.

Just below me the wagon thunders past an' a glance throwed back shows that no further shots are bein' blasted at the careenin' rig. Instead, two lines of gun flashes are turned to'rds one another an' a heavy, commandin' voice bellers: "Shoot to kill, men! Blast every she-dog's son of the renegades to hellengone! An' watch for that Tensleep; he's in this somewhere."

"Causey Barfoot!" I yelp it aloud. "You did come in, didn't you, you meat-eatin' old curly wolf!"

Not far from me, brush-hidden, a voice barks: "Wild Wind!"

"Jo-Ned!" I sing out, an' knee-rein Glory to where the chief's settin' his spotted pony, starlight runnin' along the ready barrel of his gun. "You taken my advice about that wagon? The money....?"

"Is safe, thanks to the risks you took, my friend. Now Twenty Hawks repays."

"To hell with payment, Jo-Ned! Let's get outa this before Barfoot come blastin' at anything that moves."

"Come!" he grunts. "We must catch the wagon."

"What the hell for?" I ask, but I'm follerin' him regardless. Twenty-Hawks is of the stripe that men just naturally foller—a born leader.

He sets a reckless pace, explainin' nothin'. We overhaul the failin' wagon team an' rein 'em down. "Take the lines," the chief orders. Then, dismountin', he throws off a couple riddled grass dummies an' lifts a pile of uncured hides in the wagon bed. An' there, damned if I can hardly believe it, two young squaws is lyin' unharmed, shielded perfectly by the rawhide. He barks at them in Gros Ventre. They take our ponies an' scuttle into the brush. Again Twenty-Hawks orders me into the driver's seat, an' I obey, why I dunno. It looks like suicide, with the team already spent.

HE climbs up beside me, wraps a blanket around me, an' pulls it over my head so's it covers half my face. "It's your only chance, Wild Wind," he says. "The Custer County Sheriff has men posted at the mouth of the gulch, not half a mile from here. He did the Gros Ventre a service tonight, my friend, but his purpose was and still is to take you back with him. That we must cheat him in."

So that's it? An' here I am settin' on a wagon seat, fixed to pass within inches of men primed to nab me. Posin' as an Injun an' a sure enough dead pigeon if some inquisitive posseman happens to pull at the blanket.

Scairt an' worried as I ever was, I sag in my seat to look as much as possible like a meek little lodge squaw. Twenty-Hawks sets straight an' proud beside me, croonin' some sort of a wild little tune that's likely mixed up with signs an' dreams an' such. I hold the team to an easy trot an' presently we round a bend an' see the black blot of men in the road an' the glitter of starlight runnin' along rifle barrels. A harsh voice says:

"Whoever you are, stop comin'!"

Twenty-Hawks mutters: "Keep silent," then rips off some Injun talk. I pull in on the reins an' step on the brake, hangin' my head.

"Where you bin an' where you think yo're goin'?" demands one of four armed deputies.

"Me go badlands with squaw," says Twenty-Hawks, who can talk better English than any of these possemen, when he wants to.

"You mean you drove this wagon through all that gunplay, back yonder?"

"Me drive through."

"Injun, you're all right!"

"Me carry rifle. Me kill bad man. Some I don't kill, Custer County sheriff take care of."

"Hmmm, you can say that without lyin', Injun. Didn't see nothin' of a long-legged gent on a dapple gray horse, did yuh?"

"Huh, me see nothing but gun flash. Heap dark. Me and my woman heap hungry. Heap hurry get to badlands, raise teepee and cook food. Tell sheriff him come village we cook him plenty food."

"That's right nice of you, Injun. An' we may just take you up on that. Get along with you now an' keep yore eyes peeled for that dapple horse."

"May all your children be boys," says Twenty-Hawks, liftin' his hand. He tears off some more of that outlandish Gros Ventre an' then I gather the lines an' slash at the ponies with the whip, just like any good squaw would do. We leave them possemen behind. The hills drop away to prairie an' the wind's fresh an' clean from the badlands beyond. Good place, the badlands, or so I've found it. Somehow I can't feel sorry for Twenty-Hawks an' his people. Every man, woman an' child with important money in the sock. Hidden hunting grounds where wild game still roams an' few whites come to remind the Gros Ventre they ain't so free as once. Just an occasional cowboy roundin' up strays an' a few gents like yours truly who appreciates the friendship of Injuns an' anybody else. As if he's read my thoughts, Twenty-Hawks grunts:

"It's good to have a friend, Wild Wind."

"You said it, Jo-Ned. But even friends gotta have food."

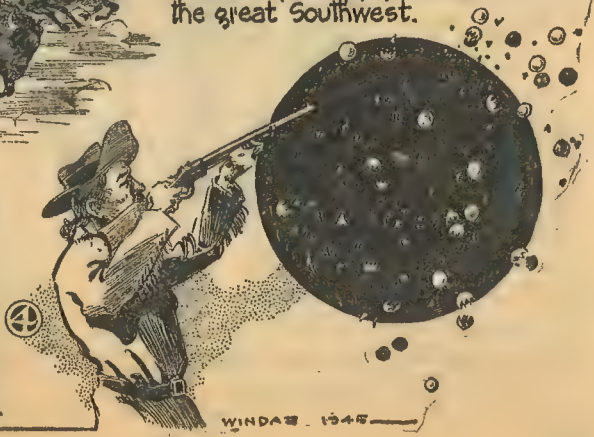
I knew Glory Hawss would be waitin' for me at the end o' this ride. An' I was plumb itchin' to fork that old cayuse ag'in.

W. F. CARVER ①

One of the most romantic figures of the old West was W.F. 'Doctor' Carver. A strapping lad, at twelve years old he ran away from home to escape a 'strapping' father. Taking his dad's best horse and best rifle, he set out to seek Adventure.... and he certainly found it.

He trapped and hunted with the famous Bill Porter, and put in his spare time fighting Sioux Indians. The redskins called him "Evil Spirit of the Plains," because Carver's bullets always meant death. He left Nebraska for fields farther West, and was a partner with Wild Bill Hickok and 'Texas Jack' Omohundro.

He scouted for Generals Terry, Crook and Custer. He hunted buffalo from 1863 to 1875, and was the only plainsman who ever beat Buffalo Bill's record killing bison. He helped settlers drive out bad characters, both red and white, from the sparsely populated districts of the great Southwest.



When Civilization tamed our frontiers, Carver made a fortune traveling with Wild West shows around the world. His finest record for trick shooting was shattering 10,000 glass balls a day for six consecutive days.
'Doc' Carver died in 1927, still active at the age of eighty-seven, one of the last of all his colorful contemporaries.

DEATH-DANCE IN FANDANGO

"Pull up!" a harsh voice ordered.

A king's ransom of shiny gold eagles was in that girl's bag.... But it was her smoke-blue eyes that intrigued Lane Tulane—eyes for whose favorable glances he must pay in crimson coin, minted by Colt hammers!

CHAPTER ONE

Trail to Vengeance

A GENTLE breeze stirred dust swirls in Junction's wide main thoroughfare. It snatched up a discarded copy of the *Tombstone Epitaph* and sent it dancing along the boardwalk. When the newspaper fluttered past the stoop of the Acme Saloon, a drunken cowboy made a half-hearted attempt to snare it, and missed. Upon so trivial a failure hinged

By L. ERNENWEIN

- - - Smashing Frontier Novel - - -

the destiny of Lane Tulane, the man Tulane hated, and the girl he loved. . . .

Tulane stood in front of the Wells Fargo office, waiting for the southbound stage. He made a high, angular shape standing there above his sacked saddle and weather-stained warbag. Some past trouble had marked him, giving his gray eyes a brittle hardness; yet his lean, tanned face had a certain refinement of feature that seemed in direct contrast to his shabby attire.

Now, as the newspaper flapped against Tulane's brush-scabbed boots, he glanced down casually at the front page headline—GENERAL WANAMAKER BUILDS RAILROAD.

Abruptly, as if the words held tremendous import, Tulane picked up the paper and read the story, which read:

The westward thrust of railroad construction has penetrated Arizona Territory. General John Wanamaker's Texas & Western has crossed New Mexico in its race with winter weather. Rumor has it that unless the rails reach Jigsaw Divide before snow flies the T&W will go bankrupt. But Superintendant Medwick, who is in charge of construction, declares that satisfactory progress is being maintained despite setbacks caused by a series of mysterious accidents.

Cattlemen are apprehensive, fearing that the railroad will bring homestead settlement which will eventually ruin the open range. They are also resentful of the high-handed

manner in which Texas & Western has confiscated sections of land along its right-of-way—especially Max Harlequin, whose big Bar H holdings stand to lose most from the railroad's invasion. Western terminus of the T&W is now at Fandango.

Tulane tossed the paper into the street and stood for a long moment looking at the distance-hazed Jigsaw Mountains northeast of town. Beyond those towering peaks were the Hoot Owl Hills and Fandango. . . .

"The mills of the gods grind slowly," he mused. "But they grind exceeding small."

Then he turned into the Wells Fargo office and said to the agent: "I'd like to change this ticket."

With that transaction completed, Tulane went to the Acme Saloon next door and ordered a drink. He was still toying with it when the southbound stage arrived and presently departed. Hearing it rumble out of town Tulane smiled thinly. Strange, he reflected, how a simple thing like a discarded newspaper could change a man's plans. Except for that wind-blown sheet he would be riding south now, headed for a gun-running job across the border. Instead, he would ride northward. A need for money had started him south; now the need for vengeance was prodding him in the opposite direction.

Tulane reached inside his shirt, opened a pocket of his moneybelt and brought out a folded newspaper clipping frayed by long handling. He read its text slowly, as if savoring the full import of each familiar word.

Captain Lane Tulane has been dishonorably discharged from the Sixth Texas Cavalary because of charges brought against him by General Wanamaker. A court martial found Captain Tulane guilty of disobeying the orders of his immediate superior, Major Clark Medwick, when Tulane led an attack which resulted in the decimation of three troops of cavalry and the loss of an important battle. Tulane was unable to produce satisfactory evidence in his own defense.

THERE was a mirthless smile on Tulane's face as he folded the clipping and returned it to his moneybelt. "Jigsaw Divide by the time snow flies—or bankruptcy for Jhon Wanamaker," he muttered.

Then he downed his drink and was turning from the bar when a swarthy, lathe-lean man with milk-blue eyes and a high beaked nose came into the saloon. This was Ike Roselle, foreman of Harlequin's big spread in the Hoot Owls, where Tulane had worked through one beef round-up with the Bar H crew.

"Howdy," Roselle greeted, not offering to shake hands. "Long time no see."

"Upwards of three years," Tulane agreed, and recalling how tough a crew had been at Bar H then, he asked: "Harlequin still running a renegade's roost?"

He smiled when he said it, but Roselle didn't smile. His pale eyes flicked to Tulane's gun gear, giving the half-breed holster a lingering regard. Then he said, "We're hiring riders, if you want a job."

That offer, and the deliberate appraisal that had preceded it, told Tulane that the newspaper article had hinted correctly at Harlequin's intentions. There could be no other logical reason for Bar H to hire riders at this time of year.

"Trifle late for beef round-up," he suggested mildly.

"Yeah," Roselle agreed. "In fact, we've made our gather. But we're hiring men regardless."

Tulane grinned with secret satisfaction. If Bar H was going to buck Wanamaker's railroad, this offered job would be made to order. "I might drop around and see you in a few days," he said, "if my plans work out."

"Any time," Roselle said, and started for the bar. "Have a drink?"

Tulane shook his head. There was no real friendship in this cold ramrod whose lips seldom smiled. A man would have to be hard up for companionship to drink with Roselle. He shook his head and going outside, glanced at Roselle's bronc tied to the hitchrack. Why, he wondered, would the Bar H segundo ride so far for a drink? Fandango was a lot closer to the Hoot Owl Hills. Then he sauntered over to the Palace Hotel and entered the dining room.

There was one other customer having early supper—a town-garbed man who sat at a table near the kitchen doorway. The light was poor back there, but his mustached face seemed remotely familiar to Tulane. Some whiskey drummer, he guessed. . . .

Rose, the black-haired waitress, came to Tulane's table and gave him a welcoming smile. She was, Tulane thought, as frankly a flirt as any girl he'd ever known; yet she possessed an integrity that kept her from becoming a honky-tonk girl.

"Well, handsome—I thought you took the Border stage," she greeted him.

"That's the trouble with women," Tulane said with mock seriousness. "They think too much."

Then he ordered coffee and apple pie.

The man at the rear table didn't turn his head. There was something almost furtive about him, Tulane sensed. Whiskey drummers seldom sat so far back; ordinarily they were great hands at being sociable. Afterward, when Tulane left the dining room, he glanced at the town dude again. But he couldn't get a good look at his face, for the man was

talking intently to Rose, who sat close beside him.

Seeing the way those two were surreptitiously holding hands, Tulane grinned. Romance, he reflected, was a popular product, even in Arizona. . . .

IT was coming sundown when Peg-Leg Pierce drove his stage out of the wagon yard behind the livery and tooled it up to the Wells Fargo office. He peered at the stylishly dressed girl who came quickly down the Palace Hotel steps; then, seeing the mound of baggage piled on the sidewalk, asked: "How the hell many passengers am I gittin'?"

"Just two," the agent reported, and nodded toward the oncoming girl. "Most of this stuff is hers."

Lane Tulane handed up his sacked saddle and warbag. He had ridden in from Galeyville yesterday with Peg-Leg Pierce and now the old driver said, "Thought you was headin' south, Texican."

Tulane shrugged. "Changed my plans," he said, and building a cigarette, watched the girl come along the sidewalk. She wore a little black hat perched forward so that its single ostrich tip made a feathery curve above her right eye. Tulane wasn't sure about the exact color of her hair; it was between sorrel and chestnut—like the color of a ripe pecan shell with sunlight dappling it. She wore a gray cape loosely draped over her shoulders, revealing a cameo brooch on a black band of silk about her swan-like throat.

For a moment, as she stood watching the agent hand her luggage up to Pierce, Tulane thoughtfully regarded her. Why, he wondered, would such a girl be going to Fandango? Surely she didn't belong to the siren sisterhood who sold their smiles in honky-tonks and parlor houses. She had the look of an aristocrat, yet she was traveling alone to the toughest town in Arizona Territory. It didn't make sense.

Tulane stood aside while the girl got into the stage. He noticed that Ike Roselle lounged on the Acme Saloon stoop. The Bar H foreman took off his hat and wiped the bald crown of his head with a white handkerchief. That struck Tulane as being a peculiar gesture, for a chill breeze was sweeping down from the Jigsaws and the Bar H ramrod was a cold-blooded galoot anyway. It didn't seem as if a couple drinks of whiskey could make Ike Roselle perspire. . . .

Two riders swung out of an alley and headed for the cattle corrals east of town. The agent tossed a mail sack up to Pierce, whereupon Tulane took a final drag on his cigarette and became aware of Roselle's queerly intent gaze. He was wondering about that as he got into the stage.

The girl ignored Tulane's entrance, giving her attention to a small valise which she'd opened on the seat beside her. Having no choice, Tulane took the front seat which meant that he'd ride backward and sit facing the girl. She was still ignoring him when the stage rolled out of Junction.

Tulane thought: *She's prouder than seven peacocks,* and wondered why she'd be sashaying around this country with enough baggage for five women. It occurred to him then that she might be a stage actress, like Lily Langtry whom he'd seen at the Bird Cage in Tombstone, or Dolores McCord at Virginia City.

Recalling the poem which Swinburn had composed for Dolores, he repeated it softly:

Fierce midnights and famishing morrows,
And the loves that complete and control
All the joys of the flesh, all the sorrows
That wear out the soul.
O garment not golden but gilded,
O garden where all men may dwell,
O tower not of ivory, but builded
By hands that reach heaven from hell.

There was something close to outright astonishment in the girl's voice as she exclaimed: "Why—that was written for Menken, wasn't it!"

Kidneys Must Remove Excess Acids

Help 15 Miles of Kidney Tubes Flush Out Poisonous Waste

If you have an excess of acids in your blood, your 15 miles of kidney tubes may be overworked. These tiny filters and tubes are working day and night to help Nature rid your system of excess acids and poisonous waste.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Kidneys may need help the same as bowels, so ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

Tulane nodded, said, "But her real name is McCord."

FOR a time then, as the stage clattered up the rocky slopes of the Jigsaws, they rode in silence. Evening shadows veiled the Concord's interior, so that Tulane could no longer see the girl. He heard her move to the window and tinker with the canvas drop, fastening it against the night's increasing coldness. Then, as she settled back on the seat, he became aware of a delicate perfume. Lilac, he guessed, and recalling how long a time it had been since he'd smelled so feminine a fragrance, felt an old regret and an old hunger. Five years of dismal drifting had taken their toll. Five years of futile running from the stigma of a dishonorable discharge. . . .

When Tulane lit a cigarette his face showed a bitter frown in the match flare. General Wanamaker had sent him down the back trails with a framed-up court martial; he and that smooth-talking Clark Medwick. They'd changed him from a proud captain of Confederate Cavalry into a gunsmoke renegade. But the war was long over now—and the chance for revenge was coming closer with each turn of the Concord's wheels!

Tulane was savoring the satisfaction of that thought when the girl asked quietly: "Are you going to Fandango?"

Her voice was low, and quite impersonal. Yet there was a kind of melody in it that blended with the feminine scent of her perfume. And it stirred a strong sense of admiration in Tulane, who held definite ideas about the way a woman's voice should sound.

"Yes ma'am," he said, and tried to remember whether her eyes were blue or gray.

"Is Fandango as terrible a place as they say it is?" she asked.

"Reckon so," Tulane told her. "Last time I was there it was a hardscrabble mining camp. Now it's a railroad boomtown to boot—and no proper place for a lady."

"That," she said amusedly, "is what my father wrote me."

Something about that seemed vaguely important to Tulane; as if it should explain why she was riding this stage. But he couldn't comprehend its significance. . . .

She asked: "Do you own a ranch hereabouts, Mister—"

"Tulane," he offered, adding dryly, "I own nothing except a saddle and a duffel bag stowed on the luggage rack."

That seemed to disappoint her, for she didn't speak again and Tulane thought: *She's sorry she talked to a drifter.*

Then he let his mind toy with plans for paying off John Wanamaker and Clark Medwick. By this time tomorrow he'd be in Fandango. Just the thought of being in the same town with those two stirred him to a savage eagerness; it fanned the embers of his bitter, long-held resentment for the thing they had done to him. Because Wanamaker was too old for a fist fight he'd have to take his revenge on the general by helping Max Harlequin bankrupt the T&W. But Clark Medwick wasn't too old to fight. It would be a fine thing, Tulane reflected, to feel his knuckles smash against Medwick's smug, handsome face. . . .

The stage rimmed a secondary ridge, tilted downward in descent, then crawled up another steep grade. Its monotonous rocking lulled Tulane into dozing relaxation. He had played poker most of last night at the Acme, endeavoring to bolster his slim resources. He closed his eyes, and was sleeping soundly when a gun blast jerked him awake.

"Pull up!" a harsh voice yelled. "Pull up!"

IKE ROSELLE ate supper in the Palace Hotel dining room. He smiled at Rose when she served him his dessert, and some of the coldness melted from his eyes. "I'm taking you to the dance Saturday night," he announced briefly.

"Like last time?" Rose asked, a note of sarcasm in her voice. "I waited until almost midnight."

Roselle shrugged. "A man has to earn a living," he explained. "I couldn't get here that night, but I'll make it Saturday sure." He patted her soft, rounded arm and said, "You're my girl, Rose—don't forget that."

Afterward he bought a cigar from the night clerk and set his watch by the lobby clock, which showed the hour was seven thirty-five.

"That clock about right?" he inquired.

"Sure is, Mister Roselle," the clerk assured him.

Roselle sauntered out to the dark veranda and spoke softly to the store-garbed man who lounged there. "Here's your pay-off, Fenton."

Fenton edged toward the lighted doorway, as if to count the roll of bills, but Roselle pushed him back, hissing: "Keep out of sight while you're with me, you fool!"

Then the Bar H ramrod grasped Fenton's arm. "And be damn sure you take the next stage out of this country," he warned. "Don't let some sweet-eyed female honey-fuss you into staying around this town."

"Sure, sure," Fenton agreed nervously. "You don't suppose I'd take a chance on getting caught after stealing that letter, do you?"

Roselle turned him loose and watched Fenton go into the lobby. Then he crossed Main Street and had two leisurely drinks at the

Acme Saloon's Bar before leaving Junction.

CHAPTER TWO

Interrupted Journey

THE stage was already slowing when Tulane drew his gun. "Sounds like trouble," he said, and felt the girl brush past him.

"It's me they're after," she whispered tensely.

He heard her unlatch the door and tried to grab her, but she was already gone, swallowed up in the night's blackness.

Lane Tulane did a queerly unthinking thing, then. He jumped from the slow-moving stage, almost collided with an unseen rider, and ran back, his boots making no sound in the trail's powdery dust.

He was urgently aware of talk behind him —Peg-Leg's outraged voice demanding: "What the hell you want?"

Then, as Tulane peered into the inky darkness, a hand grasped his arm. "I was hoping you'd come, but I didn't think you would," the girl whispered in a tense voice.

Tulane glanced back at the stage, saw a match flare briefly, and guessed that the road agents were rifling the luggage on the rack. "Must be looking for a strong-box, or something damn valuable," he muttered.

The girl's fingers tightened on his arm. "I'm—I'm afraid I've sprained my ankle," she said regretfully. "Will you help me into the brush, please?"

Tulane picked her up and carried her cautiously through the barbed branches of a mesquite thicket. She hadn't looked to weigh over a hundred pounds or so, but she seemed a lot heavier than that in his arms. Moving slowly he crossed a wide, sandy wash and wondered why, if it was the girl they were after, those yonder riders were spending so much time at the stage.

This deal, he reflected, was loco as a drunkard's dream. Road agents weren't in the habit of molesting women passengers, except to take their jewelry. He'd noticed no rings on this girl's fingers, yet she'd been so positive the holdup was on her account that she'd risked a broken leg to jump from the stage. . . .

Tulane heard the stagecoach rumble off northward, and presently caught the sound of riders scouting the road. That proved the girl's guess was correct. They *were* after her!

But why? And how could she have been so sure?

Almost at once, then, a horse came crashing through the brush, so close that the sound of its gusty breathing was loud in Tulane's ears. He held the girl tight, hoping that this might keep her from crying out—and was instantly aware of an answering pressure from the arm around his neck.

She's game as they come, he thought admiringly, and savored the delicate, feminine scent of her hair.

For a tense moment, as the unseen rider guided his mount in short, searching circles, it seemed as if the bronc would surely trample them. The girl's arm tightened about Tulane's neck, but the bronc went past and the girl's sigh of relief was like a gentle breeze touching Tulane's throat.

Presently another rider called: "She's not on the road!"

The man who'd just passed them snarled: "It'll be moonrise in another hour. We'll find her then, by God!"

Tulane tried to remember where he'd heard that gruff voice before. It held a bull-toned arrogance that he'd heard somewhere. . . .

"My ankle doesn't hurt now," the girl whispered. "Perhaps I only turned it."

Tulane eased her down, said: "Give it your weight. How does it feel now?"

"Much better, she told him, whereupon he took her hand and led off through the brush.

FOR a time, as they moved cautiously, feeling their way, Tulane tried to guess what part of the ridge they were on. The stage, he figured, had been southwest of Skyline when it was stopped. He didn't know how long he'd slept, and so couldn't calculate the distance they'd traveled since leaving Junction. But he did know that this was part of the Quadrille Breaks. Therefore, it shouldn't be far to Breed Santana's horse camp. . . .

The girl asked, "Do you know where we are?"

"Not exactly," Tulane admitted.

It occurred to him then that this deal was delaying his arrival at Fandango. Thinking about the pay-off he'd planned for Clark Medwick tomorrow, he cursed softly. He should be well on his way now, instead of floundering around in the brush with a girl whose name he didn't know. He should have stayed in the stagecoach and let her shift for herself. She didn't mean anything to him, even if she *was* prettier than a painted wagon. Yet he had been aware of a queer sense of satisfaction at the touch of her hand in his. And admiration for her courage. Whatever she was—actress or aristocrat—she sure had plenty of sand!

Lane Tulane admired spunky women. As a boy he'd cherished the story his dad told about his mother: how she had saved the day during a Comanche raid when two knife-wielding braves had forced the kitchen door. Tulane chuckled aloud, remembering.

"Whatever struck you so funny?" the girl inquired.

"I was recalling a story my father used to tell about my mother," Tulane said. "He'd say, real proud: 'She scalded them two stinkin' Comanches with a skillet of boilin' water—then brained 'em with a broomstick. And her the notional, fancy-Nancy daughter of a Methodist minister!'"

"Your mother must have had a lot of courage," the girl said. "She must have been a wonderful woman."

"Yeah," Tulane agreed, and remembering how hard his disgrace had hit his folks, silently cursed. They were both dead now, and would never know how he intended to exact vengeance for the blot which had been put on the name of Tulane. . . .

For a time then, while a cold wind drifted down from the Jigsaws, Tulane plodded on in silence. He'd never done much walking; his high-heeled boots became more uncomfortable with each mile and he guessed his feet would be well blistered by the time he reached Santana's place. It occurred to him then that the girl's stylish shoes must also be giving her considerable discomfort, yet she made no complaint.

When the first rain drops came she said, "I guess we're going to get wet. But at least there'll be no moonlight."

Almost at once then it was raining hard—a cold, wind-driven rain that seemed on the verge of turning to sleet. Tulane trudged grimly ahead, cursing the icy water that seeped through his riding jacket. This, he reflected, would make it almost impossible for the road agents to trail them, come daylight; but it turned the ground into a quagmire of 'dobe mud that made walking a tedious chore. The girl was having trouble keeping her feet; she kept falling against him, and presently, as they sloshed through ankle-deep water in an arroyo, she gave a little gasp at its icy coldness.

Tulane picked her up. He staggered across the arroyo, stumbled against an unseen boulder on the opposite bank and went to his knees.

The girl's wet cheek brushed against his as she said, "Thanks," and pulled free of his arms. Whereupon they climbed out of the arroyo and continued across a wide, wind-swept mesa for what seemed hours. After that they descended into a canyon, slipping and sliding, fighting to keep their feet in the rain-slashed darkness.

Tulane thought: *This must be Spanish Canyon, which means Santana's place isn't far off.* He had ridden with Breed Santana during the Pardee-Shannon feud four years ago. Breed had the only ranch in the Quadrille Breaks—a horse outfit which was a kind of a way station for border-bound renegades. But Tulane had no way of knowing whether they were above or below the horse camp. Rounding a deep notch in the canyon wall, he halted. There was no wind here, and scarcely any rain. He explored the upper wall with his hand and discovered that it jutted out far enough to form a protecting shelf above them.

Presently he said: "We camp here."

"Good!" the girl exclaimed. "I'll help you gather some firewood."

That offer astonished Tulane. He'd guessed she was about ready to drop after limping weary miles on a turned ankle. . . .

He said: "I'll fetch the wood. You take off your shoes and stockings and we'll dry 'em out."

SHE didn't speak again until he had a fire going. Then she held her slim fingers above the flames and said, "There's nothing on earth so cheerful as a camp fire."

Tulane grinned. Firelight danced against the canyon wall. It put a warming glow on the girl's rain-wet face and emphasized the redness of her smiling lips. She was, he thought, like the images a man dreamed of seeing across a campfire. She sat hugging her knees now, with her bare feet close to the coals. He noticed that her skirt was torn and muddied. Then he saw the small valise beside her. . . .

"Why in tarnation did you tote that?" he demanded.

She didn't answer for a moment. She had lost the perky little hat. Her sorrel hair fell in disorder about her shoulders, giving her the look of a little girl. A tired little girl, who smiled wistfully up at him.

Then she gestured toward the valise and said: "There's fifteen thousand dollars in it—gold eagles and currency."

Fifteen thousand dollars!

Tulane stood in stunned silence. No wonder she had been so sure the road agents were after her. And recalling how heavy she had seemed when he carried her, Tulane knew the answer. She had clung to that valise all those weary miles since leaving the stagecoach.

He loosed a gusty laugh. This girl wasn't just spunky. She was downright stubborn!

"Do you always sashay around the country loaded down with gold eagles and dollar bills?" he asked dryly.

The girl shook her head. "That money represents the sale price of our home in Texas," she explained. "It's all that remains of my father's fortune—and it is needed at Fandango. Badly."

"So bad you'd risk your life saving it?" Tulane muttered.

She nodded. "Come sit here out of the rain," she invited, "and I'll tell you about it."

Tulane sat down beside her and pulled

off his boots, letting the water run out of them. When he failed to remove his socks, the girl said: "Don't be bashful," and wiggled her toes. "I wasn't."

Tulane grinned sheepishly and peeled off his soggy socks. He reached for a mesquite limb; propping it against an upright boot he arranged stockings and socks on it to dry. The fire's warmth felt good against his aching feet. He eased back against the wall, his shoulder touchings hers, and enjoyed the feminine fragrance of her wet hair. Strange, he thought, how much difference a girl's presence made. Except for her, this would be a lonely campfire, as so many others had been—a dismal bivouac on a cold and dreary night. But with her here beside him it didn't seem dismal at all. It was downright cheerful. . . .

As if sharing some part of his thoughts, she said: "It's odd that we should be together like this, and not know each other's first names. Mine is Laurie."

"A pretty name," Tulane said, adding gallantly, "for a real pretty girl."

Then he said, "Mine is Lane."

"Lane Tulane," she mused, her low voice giving the two words a melodious sound. "Why, that's a fine name."

"It was," Tulane muttered, "up until five years ago."

Then, as she turned her head to look directly at him, as if expecting an explanation, Tulane felt the full impact of her glance. There was a womanly warmth in her eyes now; her full, curved lips were softly scarlet in the fire's reflected light and they whipped up a compelling want in him that was like hunger and thirst combined—a need so overwhelming that it possessed him completely.

He said: "Laurie!"

He took her into his arms and heard her whisper "Lane," and saw that her lips were gently smiling. Whereupon he drew her firmly—almost roughly—against him.

IKE ROSELLE rode into the Bar H yard at midnight. He peered through slanting sheets of rain to where lamp light made a yellow shine in the window of Max Harlequin's office. The boss, he guessed, was celebrating with Monk Flamonde; they were probably warming their bellies with a bottle of bourbon. Roselle quickly unsaddled and turned his bronc into the corral.

A man in the bunkhouse doorway called: "That you, Ike?"

"Yeah," Roselle said, and crossing the muddy yard, went into the house.

Max Harlequin was big and broad and bald as a bullet. He sat with his bootless feet propped on the rim of a brass cuspidor close to the fireplace. He held a whiskey glass in a fat-fingered right hand which sported a huge and brilliant diamond ring. "Damn near time you showed up," he greeted Roselle sourly.

Roselle's glance flitted from his boss to the ape-faced rider who stood with his back to the fire, warming his wet shanks. He asked: "Didn't she have the money?"

Monk Flamonde shrugged, his muddy eyes showing their usual blankness. But Max Harlequin's eyes weren't blank; they glinted in the lamplight and he snarled: "If she had the bankroll she's still got it. We went through every damned piece of baggage on the stage and didn't find a dime!"

"What happened to the girl!" Roselle asked, pouring himself a drink.

"Jumped, damn' her, and hid out in the brush," Harlequin muttered. Then he asked: "Did you pay off Alec Fenton?"

Roselle nodded. He said, "The girl won't get far afoot on a night like this."

Harlequin downed his drink and flung the glass into the fireplace. "I've got to have that money," he snapped. "We're riding at first daylight—and we're not coming back without it!"

CHAPTER THREE

"Reach High!"

FOR a timeless interval, while their lips met and lingered, Lane Tulane forgot that he was a back-trail renegade with a mission of vengeance ahead of him. The night's sleety wetness disappeared; all the dismal days of the past vanished from his mind and he knew only that he was kissing the sweetest lips any man had ever kissed. And those lips were answering him, generously, passionately. They were telling him something without the use of words; they were impressing him with a profound conviction that here was the woman he had wanted all these years without knowing she existed.

It was a thing to cherish, that embrace. It rocked all his senses; it made him want to laugh and shout in sheer exaltation. It was like a swift flame rising higher and higher inside him; a wild, free flame that burned joyously and without restraint. Afterward, it was like the lingering music of mission bells slowly fading as Laurie drew gently away from him.

"It's almost daylight," she murmured.

Even then Tulane's arms held her for a moment longer, his eyes exploring the shadowed loveliness of her face. He said, "I still don't know whether your eyes are blue or gray."

Laurie smiled. "After all the time we've known each other," she said censuringly, and reached for her stockings. "I'm surprised at you, Lane."

He grinned. "I'm surprised at myself," he said thoughtfully. "I am for a fact."

It didn't seem possible that he'd known this sorrel-haired girl less than twenty-four hours. The thought came to him that he didn't even know her last name, nor anything about her—except that she was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. It was almost daylight now and he was suddenly aware of his bare, sock-stained feet. Reaching hastily for his socks and boots he put them on, then busied himself replenishing the fire.

"A little coffee would sure go good right now," he suggested.

Laurie had her back to him, adjusting her stockings. "It certainly would," she agreed. "Are we far from Fandango?"

"Too far for breakfast, or dinner either—unless we find some horses," Tulane told her. "I'm going upstairs for a looksee."

Whereupon he climbed the canyon wall. A slow drizzle of rain still fell, but the wind had died down and pink streamers of approaching sunrise showed in the eastern sky, which was clear of clouds. He glimpsed the mist-shrouded bulge of Skyline to the north and recognized the roundabout jumble of brush-tangled arroyos and buttes as being the Quadrille Breaks. Making a tally of familiar landmarks he calculated the location of Santana's horse camp and guessed that it was three or four miles down-canyon.

When he returned to the camp-fire, Tulane gave Laurie a speculative glance. She sat on a boulder, arranging her hair and gazing absently into the fire. She had somehow contrived to tidy her skirt so that it was free of mud stains; and except for the fact that her hat was missing, she again looked like the proud, immaculately garbed girl who'd boarded the Fandango stage in Junction.

She asked, almost casually, "Do you know where we are?"

Tulane nodded. "I think I can borrow a couple broncs and be back here in less than an hour, if you don't mind waiting alone."

"I don't mind," Laurie said.

As Tulane turned away he noticed the valise. That reminded him that she hadn't told him why all that money was needed in Fandango. Yet even then he had no inkling of how monstrous a prank Fate was playing on him. . . .

BREED SANTANA was cooking breakfast in his 'dobe house when Tulane came to the door. The scar-faced Mexican gave a glad yell, shook Tulane's hand with both of his and exclaimed: *"Bueno—bueno! Breakfast she is almost done, amigo!"*

Tulane grinned, sniffing the fine flavor of boiling coffee and frying bacon. "Sure smells good," he declared. Then, when he'd told Breed he needed two broncs *muy pronto,* he asked: "Any riders stop by here last night?"

"No riders—just rain," Breed reported, leading the way to the saddle shed where he picked up a catch rope. "Two broncs—then you 'ave the *compadre,* no?"

"A very beautiful *compadre,*" Tulane admitted.

Breed winked one eye knowingly. "A dove in the brush," he said softly. Then he added: "The years 'ave change you, *amigo.*"

Tulane was thinking about that as he rode back up the canyon, leading a saddled bronc. There'd been many times when he could have had feminine companionship for the asking. Girls like Rose, who weren't particular about a man's past. But they hadn't been what he wanted, and now that he'd found Laurie, he was glad he had waited.

It occurred to him that he would have to show her the clipping in his money belt, and explain why he must settle his score with Wanamaker and Medwick. But she would understand. And when the good name of Tulane had been avenged she would be willing to accept it for her own. Remembering how readily she had shared his emotion last night, Tulane felt completely confident.

The rain had ceased. Morning's first sunlight was gilding the high ridges and Tulane thought: *I'm luckier than a four-leaf clover!* He grinned, and was on the verge of whistling a cheery tune when he saw two riders rim the west wall of the canyon. Almost at once they disappeared, but in that brief instant the grin faded from Tulane's face and something close to panic clutched him. Those two riders must be the road agents—and they'd been headed toward the canyon camp fire!

Tulane spurred his mount to a run and thanked God that the second bronc was a free leader. If he could reach Laurie before the road agents found her there'd be a good chance of out-riding them to Santana's place at least. The deep, rain-sogged sand made heavy going here; but even so it was better than bucking the muddy, brush-tangled banks higher up. And the bronc's hoofs made no noise. He was counting on that, hoping those two riders would fail to hear his hurried approach.

The camp fire was just around the next bend now. Tulane could see a flimsy tendril of smoke above the canyon's wall. He wondered if the road agents had spotted that smoke—and felt sure they had. They would hardly miss a sign as plain as that.

Another hundred yards would tell the tale. Tulane urged his horse to a faster pace. He dallied the lead reins around the saddle horn so that his right hand would be free, and drew his gun. If they molested Laurie. . . .

Then he was around the bend, was seeing two men dismount at the campfire—and was hearing Laurie exclaim: "Dad—oh Dad, I'm so glad you're here!"

Those three heard him then, the two men whirling. Whereupon Lane Tulane found himself staring into the faces of John Wanamaker and Clark Medwick!

Dimly, as if from a far distance, he heard them exclaim in unison "Tulane!" and heard Laurie say in a pleased voice: "How odd that you should know him."

Odd!

The word rang like a bell in Tulane's brain. What was odd about them knowing him? Hadn't they lied him out of the Sixth Texas Cavalry?

Then he remembered hearing Laurie's exclamation as he'd ridden up. She'd called Wanamaker *Dad.*

Tulane sheathed his gun. He dismounted and turned to Laurie and asked in a hushed voice: "Is your name Wanamaker?"

She nodded, smiling, while her father and Medwick stood beside in stunned silence.

Tulane nodded toward the valise. "Then that money was needed for the railroad," he said slowly, as if endeavoring to convince himself of an astounding fact.

"Yes, Lane—it's to meet the next payroll, so that the steel will reach Jigsaw Divide on time," the girl explained. "And you helped save it. Except for you the road agents would have surely got it."

A sighing curse slid from Lane Tulane's lips. "Of all the stinking tricks Fate could play on a man," he muttered, and at the same instant recalled reading somewhere that John Wanamaker's daughter was engaged to marry Clark Medwick. . . .

Tulane's long lips twisted into a cynical grin. *That makes it complete,* he thought. *It makes me the perfect fool!*

ABRUPTLY then all the pent-up resentment of five dismal years coiled inside him and he wheeled to face Medwick. "You've got no uniform now, you sneaking liar. Put up your fists and fight!"

"Wait!" Medwick blurted, a sober, harassed expression on his blocky face. "It was all a mistake, Tulane—a terrible mistake!"

"It sure as hell was," Tulane growled, and lunged forward.

"No, Tulane—no!" Wanamaker shouted.

But Tulane ignored the old man's arrogant command. Putting the full weight of his moving body into that first blow, he hit Medwick in the face before the ex-major could get his guard up. Simultaneously he was vaguely aware of Laurie's shocked voice calling: "Lane—*Lane!*"

He hit Medwick's face again, that meaty impact giving him a savage satisfaction. He felt Medwick's knuckles scrape his jaw in a glancing, ineffectual way, and laughed aloud. Here was part of the pay-off he'd dreamed about for five long years—ever since the day this man had testified against him in that lie-packed court martial!

John Wanamaker jumped between them. "Stop it!" he protested. "We discovered only last week that you were innocent, Tulane!"

That frantic declaration scarcely registered on Lane Tulane. He pushed the old general aside, rushed Medwick and hit him with both hands. When Medwick went down, Tulane stood above him panting: "Get up and fight, you yellow-bellied liar!"

Laurie's father barged in front of him again, insisting: "Clark didn't lie, Tulane! He was innocent as—as you were. I tell you we only found out a week ago that your dismissal was a tragic mistake!"

Something in the old cavalryman's flashing eyes cut through the red haze of Tulane's hate. Wanamaker's battered campaign hat and officer's overcoat were without insignia, yet he retained the carriage and the confidence of a commander. . . .

In this momentary lull, Clark Medwick staggered to his feet. He rubbed his blood-smeared jaw and said soberly: "Perhaps you remember my aide—a fellow named Alec Fenton."

Tulane nodded.

"Fenton hired on with T&W as my chief clerk," Medwick explained. "A week ago he got drunk and bragged about how he'd got you run out of the army on a fake order. Seems he had it in for you, for some reason; hated you enough to cause the death of a hundred men in an effort to get you killed."

Tulane stared at Medwick as if seeing him for the first time. "You mean—you didn't order that attack as Fenton told me?" he demanded.

Medwick shook his head. "If I had, I'd have taken the full responsibility for its outcome," he declared, and Tulane knew instinctively, now, that this man was telling the truth.

"Clark had been telling me for days that no advance could be made on the line at that particular point," Wanamaker explained, banishing the last strand of doubt in Tulane's mind. "Because Clark had expressed that opinion so strongly, I knew he didn't order the ill-fated attack—and knowing your reputation for reckless courage, I was convinced you did it on your own initiative."

THE old general added wonderingly: "Fenton must have hated you insanely, to send Texas troopers to almost certain death just to disgrace you."

"He did." Tulane's voice was flat. "Before the war we lived on neighboring ranches. That part of Texas was Quarterhorse country and we held Sunday races. Fenton owned a sorrel stud that could beat every horse around there except my hammer-headed dun gelding. He lost a lot of money betting on his stud, and folks began to call him 'Second-Best' Fenton. He hated me after that, and later, when I was given the captain's commission he'd been trying to get, his girl quit him. But he had a yellow streak that kept him from fighting me. He just nursed his grudge, waiting for a chance to get even."

"And got his revenge by causing you to be drummed out of the Army," Medwick muttered tersely.

Tulane grimly nodded. "I should've suspected it at the time. But I was too spooked to think of anything except the disgrace—and what it would do to my folks."

"It must have hurt them terribly hard," Laurie murmured.

Her voice was warm with sympathy, but to Tulane she didn't seem like the same girl, standing there beside Clark Medwick. She was like a stranger, merely showing a polite interest in his affairs. And that, he understood now, was all she'd ever be. . . .

Medwick said: "When Fenwick bragged about what he'd done to you I felt like killing him, Tulane. I fired him on the spot, and knocked him down for good measure. Last night, after the stage driver reported the hold-up, I discovered that Laurie's letter telling me when she'd arrive with the money, was missing from my files. I guessed then that Fenton had sold that information to Max Harlequin, who's tried all sorts of underhanded tricks to stop us."

So that was it! That was why Ike Roselle had been in Junction yesterday. Abruptly, then, Tulane remembered how Roselle had wiped his face with a white handkerchief—taking that means of signaling Laurie's entrance into the stage. And he remembered something else: the dude-dressed man in the hotel dining room whose half-glimpsed face had seemed so familiar!

"Fenton!" he exclaimed. "Fenton with a mustache! He was in Junction yesterday!"

And at this exact instant a voice directly behind him commanded: "Reach high, galoots—reach high!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Death Dance!

TULANE turned and saw Monk Flamonde's ape-like face—and his rigidly leveled gun. He said, "Hello, Monk," and remembering that this slow-witted man was amazingly fast with a gun, knew how hopeless this deal was. . . .

"Don't try nothin' foolish," Flamonde warned. "I ain't choosy who I shoot."

Then he said, "Unbuckle them gunbelts, one at a time," and nodded at Tulane. "You first."

When Wanamaker and Medwick had complied in turn, Flamonde said: "Now take a little walk down the canyon and leave that valise behind."

Tulane followed the others away from the camp fire. He saw Laurie look back. He noticed the defeated expression in her eyes and wondered if she were still engaged to Clark Medwick. In all probability she was. But for a little time last night she had forgotten Medwick completely. Remembering that time now, Tulane decided there'd been some potent magic at that camp fire—the same magic which had affected him so urgently.

"There goes the dirty thief!" Medwick exclaimed, and wheeling, Tulane saw Flamonde ride up the canyon's west wall and disappear over it.

Laurie grasped her father's arm. "Can you keep the work going, Dad—now that the money is gone?"

Dejectedly, Wanamaker shook his head. His shoulders were slumped and he looked like a defeated old man. "The men won't work without pay," he muttered. "And the banks won't lend us another dollar if we fail to reach the Divide on schedule."

"It looks like T&W is doomed," Medwick put in, a frown creasing his fist-scarred face. "I hate to think of all the small investors who'll lose their life savings."

Laurie glanced questioningly at Tulane. "Isn't there some way of getting that valise back, Lane?" she asked him.

It was, Tulane understood, a sort of dare, and perhaps something more. For although her voice held no hint of pleading, there was pleading in her eyes. She was, he guessed, telling him that he, and only he, had the savvy to retrieve that stolen bankroll. And now, with her sunlit face so close he could see the delicate freckles which dusted the bridge of her nose, he saw also that her eyes were blue. A beautiful, wood-smoke blue. . . .

Tulane grinned. This was his day for learning things. Her eyes were blue, her last name was Wanamaker, and he had no score of vengeance to settle with her father. Nor with Clark Medwick. In fact, he owed the ex-major an apology.

"One man with a gun took that money away from us," Laurie mused. "Couldn't another man with a gun take it away from him?"

"He could try," Tulane admitted. Then he turned to Medwick and said: "I regret that fight. I had you figured wrong."

"Don't blame you in the least," Medwick assured him. "I only wish there was some way I could repay you for my mistake."

Tulane thought: *There's one way you could repay me—by giving up all claim to this blue-eyed girl.* But no man would do that.

"You folks can get some breakfast at Santana's place four miles down the canyon," Tulane said. "Tell Breed you're friends of mine—and that I'll pay him for the horses when I see him again."

Then Tulane strode quickly to the camp fire, buckled on his gunbelt and got into the saddle. "See you in Fandango," he said grimly, and then was on his way up the canyon.

"Good luck, Lane," Laurie called after him.

The melody of her voice was like a lilting refrain as he rode northward.

ALL that morning, and well into the afternoon, Monk Flamonde kept looking over his shoulder as he jogged steadily toward the Bar H. Strange, he thought, that there'd been no sign of Harlequin and Roselle. The three of them had separated at first daylight, scouring the Quadrille Breaks for the girl. Sooner or later Max and Ike should cut his trail at the canyon, read the sign and follow him home.

A gloating grin creased Monk's flat-featured face. Harlequin had promised to split the T&W money three ways and there was a scad of it, by the weight of the valise. There'd be plenty of booze at Bar H tonight. Maybe, Monk thought, Harlequin might make him foreman in place of that lily-livered Roselle who was always talking about brains being better than bullets. Ike, he guessed, had a yellow streak in him; Ike got sick whenever he killed a man.

Monk chuckled, recalling all the times he'd beat other men to the draw. Killing was like eating. You had to do a certain amount of it to live....

He was within sight of Bar H, riding through a brush-fringed draw, when Lane Tulane called sharply: "Hoist your hands, Monk, and hoist 'm high!"

For one fleeting moment, while Monk's head jerked around, he failed to comply with that order. Instead his hand dipped instinctively toward his holster. At that movement, Tulane fired, that slug creasing Flamonde's right hand and knocking it back.

Monk cursed. He held his slug-slashed right arm above his head and yelled: "All right—all right!"

Tulane came down the bank, a tight, taunting grin on his face. He said, "Next one will be smack-dab between your eyes," and

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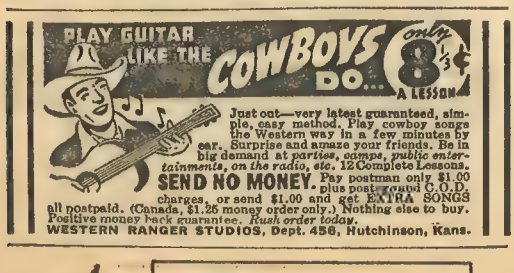

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reaching warily for Monk's gun, flung it far into the brush. Then he said, "Light down now, you sneaking son."

Monk dismounted. He said flatly: "Max Harlequin will crucify you for this, Tulane."

"Have to catch me first," Tulane jeered, eyeing the valise thonged to Monk's saddle. "Your bronc is a lot fresher than mine, Monk. I'll borrow him for a spell."

And then, as Tulane mounted, he heard riders coming from the ranch. Whirling the Bar H bronc, he headed back down the trail at a run. That gun blast, he guessed, was going to make this deal tougher than he'd anticipated. He would have to do some damn fast riding now before he could circle around toward Fandango.

Abruptly then he heard horses coming toward him and guessed instantly who those nearby riders were. Even as he cut sharply off the trail he heard Max Harlequin's bull-throated yell: "It's Tulane!"

The Bar H bronc tried to clear a rock outcrop, failed and went to its knees. Simultaneously, a bullet whanged above Tulane's head. He pulled the horse out its sprawling fall, and because this mishap had saved him from that close-flying slug, loosed an exultant laugh.

Other bullets came as he rushed the bronc into a rocky arroyo, but Tulane paid them scant heed. Hell-for-leather cavalry charges had taught him the futility of worrying about bullets he could hear. Early in the war a tough old sergeant had told him: "It's the ones you don't hear that do the damage, young feller."

Presently the firing ceased and he heard Harlequin bellow: "Spread out—spread out!"

The Bar H owner knew all the tricks of this game. He'd used those same tricks against hapless homesteaders when he'd crowded them out of the Hoot Owl Hills. Recalling tales of Harlequin's greed-goaded brutality, Tulane winced at the thought that he'd intended to join Harlequin's fight against the railroad. The Bar H owner would never know how close he'd come to gaining an eager recruit; he would never guess that except for a blue-eyed girl who'd kissed a renegade, Lane Tulane might have fought T&W tooth and nail....

Afterward, when all sounds of chase had faded, Tulane turned eastward. It was coming sundown now; he was a long ways from Fandango, and hungrier than seven Sonora steers.

IT WAS dusk when Max Harlequin, Rosélle and Flamonde halted just north of Santana's horse camp. The Bar H boss said, "Tulane

might be filling his gut at Breed's table right now."

"I don't think so," Roselle muttered thoughtfully. "Tulane will figger we'd watch this canyon, which is the natural short-cut to Fandango. So he'll take the stage road, go the long way around."

Monk Flamonde loosed a jeering laugh. "It must be nice to have a big brain," he scoffed. "A man hardly needs a gun at all, just so's his brain is big."

"Shut up," Harlequin snapped. "We'll damn soon find out if Tulane has been here."

He turned his mount into the yard and yelled arrogantly: "Santana!"

Breed came to the doorway. *"Quien es?"* he called nervously, and peered at the three men dismounting.

Harlequin stepped close to the Mexican, drew his gun and demanded; "Anybody been around here in the last couple hours?"

"No, senor—"

Harlequin's gun snapped up and down in a chopping blow that brought its barrel against Breed's head. "Don't lie to me you dog!"

Breed staggered back against the door frame and would have collapsed except that Flamonde grabbed him, propping Santana upright. "Give him another," Monk suggested hopefully.

Roselle remained in the background, taking no part in this brutal horseplay. He said, "Why waste time here Max? We know where Tulane is headed for, and we can give him the same deal he gave Monk."

"What's that?" Harlequin demanded.

"Why, it's simple," Roselle explained. "Tulane knew Monk would head for Bar H, didn't he? Well, instead of chasing Monk, he took a short cut to the ranch and ambushed Monk. We can do the same damn thing, if Tulane took the stage road to Fandango. And I think he did."

That strategy registered with Max Harlequin. "By God you might be right!" he exclaimed. He turned to Monk. "Let loose of him," he ordered curtly, and when Breed's body sagged down in front of Harlequin, the Bar H boss kicked the unconscious Mexican before stepping over him.

"I think we should make Breed talk, first," Monk declared resentfully, a sadistic eagerness glinting his muddy eyes. "Mebbe if we give him a little more treatment, he'll tell us right where Tulane is at."

That suggestion plainly appealed to Harlequin. Remaining here would mean a chance to eat— and have some fun with Santana in the bargain.

But Roselle said impatiently, "If we ride right now we can get to Fandango ahead of

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That did it. Harlequin turned to his horse and climbed to the saddle. "All right Ike." But God help you if you're wrong!"

Moonlight flooded the east slope of Jigsaw Divide as Lane Tulane jogged the fagged Bar H bronc down the stage road. Hunger was gnawing at Tulane's stomach and long hours in the saddle made him slump like a tired old man. But the lamplit windows of Fandango were close ahead now, and a rising sense of satisfaction eased some of the weariness from him. In another few minutes he'd be delivering the money-filled valise to John Wanamaker—would be seeing Laurie's smoke-blue eyes and sweet-smiling lips. And he'd be warning Clark Medwick that he intended to take Laurie away from him!

IT OCCURRED to Tulane then that there was one more chore he had to do before he could ask Laurie to change her last name to Tulane. Alec Fenton had disgraced that name; he'd brought shame to the finest parents a man ever had. Fenton would pay for that, and for the slaughter of brave troopers who'd died in the ill-fated attack for which he alone had been responsible. If Fenton was still in Junction that debt would soon be settled; but no matter how long a time it took, the debt would be paid—in full!

These were the things Tulane was thinking about as he rode into the sprawling outskirts of Fandango. He passed the cattle corrals at the west end of town and was within five hundred yards of the Railroad Hotel when muzzle flame bloomed suddenly from shadowed alleys on both sides of the street.

Instantly Tulane drew and fired, snapping two fast shots. A slug sliced hair from his horse's mane; another ripped raggedly along Tulane's ribs, burning the flesh. He swung the Bar H bronc, knowing his only chance was to reach the protection of the cattle corrals. But even as the bronc wheeled in a pivoting turn, bullets caught the animal broadside, and it collapsed. Tulane jumped clear and saw three riders race at him. He fired and missed, and fired again. A horse fell headlong, but its rider landed on his feet and Tulane recognized Max Harlequin's big-bodied shape behind an uptilting gun. And suddenly he realized that there was only one shot left in his gun.

Tulane took time for deliberate aim, forcing a steadiness into his right arm. Even though he himself couldn't survive, he might at least live long enough to kill that greedy renegade bent on bankrupting a railroad. Harlequin fired first, a hurriedly-aimed slug that raked

Tulane's left cheek. But it didn't spoil his aim. His slug stopped Harlequin completely; it clubbed the big man down, causing him to sprawl sideways, so that he fell directly in front of Monk Flamonde's plunging bronc.

Tulane grinned. Even though his gun was empty, he grinned. Max Harlequin was dead!

Then Tulane threw his gun at the ape-faced rider, and heard another explosion somewhere to his right. That, he guessed, would be Roselle, closing in now for the kill.

But Flamonde wasn't firing. He was slumping in the saddle, was sliding headlong from his spooked bronc. And Ike Roselle was riding off hell-for-leather down the street!

Then Tulane turned and saw Clark Medwick rushing towards him from the sidewalk, calling, "Are you all right, Tulane?"

In that moment Tulane understood why Monk had died before he could kill an unarmed man, and why Roselle had run away. The monstrous irony of it struck Tulane like a physical blow, stunning him to a momentary speechlessness. Medwick had saved his life!

A crowd was quickly collecting—men and women from the nearby dancehall, and from the saloon and hotel. Laurie Wanamaker came running through the throng of milling people, but Tulane didn't see her at first. He was untying the valise from the saddle of the dead Bar H bronc. And he was thinking again: *Medwick saved my life.*

He handed the valise to Medwick, saying flatly: "There's the bankroll—and thanks for saving my bacon."

Then Laurie rushed up to him, exclaiming; "Lane—you're hurt!"

Her slim fingers explored his bloody cheek, her eyes glowing with a warmth he'd never seen in them before. But he was still thinking of Medwick—the man who had just saved his life. Tulane stared at her hopelessly. He couldn't ever take this girl from Clark Medwick now; even if she was willing to be taken, he couldn't cheat Medwick that way.

He said briefly: "There's nothing wrong with me that a few drinks won't cure," and turning abruptly away from her, he walked rapidly off towards the Cross-Tie Saloon.

CHAPTER FIVE

Vengeance By Proxy!

WITH one drink of whiskey burning his empty stomach like liquid fire, Tulane left the bar. The big, barn-like room was crowded with railroad workers who'd had taken their morbid look at the dead men on Main Street, and were now back at their drinking.

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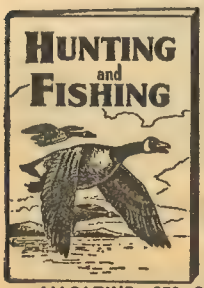

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A red-shirted cowpuncher slapped Tulane on the shoulder, exclaiming: "Ye did a slick job on that spalpeen Harlequin, me boy!"

Stolidly ignoring the remark, Tulane made his way to the eating counter across the room and ordered a meal. A man should have some food in his stomach before he did much drinking—and he intended to do considerable. For he couldn't rid his mind of the thought of Clark Medwick. And the baffled expression he'd seen in Laurie's eyes as he'd turned away from her was like a barb inside of him.

Hungry as he'd been an hour ago, Tulane ate his meal without relish. And because he chose to forget now that he'd ever met a girl called Laurie Wanamaker, he put his mind to plans for catching up with Alec Fenton. He wondered if that sneaking son was still at Junction, and recalling the romantic scene he'd witnessed in the dining room, guessed Fenton might still be hanging around Rose.

Afterward, when he'd returned to the long mahogany bar and was toying with his third drink, Tulane smiled thinly as Clark Medwick pushed in beside him. The ex-major's face wore a worried frown. "Laurie wants to see you at the hotel, Tulane," he said. "She's waiting for you on the veranda."

"So?" Tulane said disinterestedly. He made no move to leave, and Medwick cried, "Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Tulane considered that question for a moment in reflective silence. He thought: *Sure it means something to me. It means that I can take her away from you.*

Finally he said, almost derisively: "No, Medwick—it doesn't mean a thing."

Relief showed in the ex-major's brown eyes. He said, "I can't understand it, Tulane," and then, because he had an integrity that forced him to be fair, he asked: "Are you drunk?"

"Hell no," Tulane assured him. "I'm sober as seven circuit-riding gospel-slingers on a Sunday morning."

Clark Medwick shook his head in bewildered fashion, then, and left him.

Later, when the whiskey had dulled the thought of Laurie and Medwick sufficiently, Tulane left the Cross-Tie Saloon. Main Street's crisp, clean air seemed sharp and cool after the smoke-fouled warmth of the saloon and it banished the whiskey fog from his brain. He was completely sober when he passed the Railroad Hotel. Yet even so, he thought he was dreaming when Laurie called softly from the veranda, "Lane!"

THEN he saw her, a vague, supple shape in the shadows. "Hello," he greeted her huskily, and stepped up to the veranda railing.

"Dad wants to thank you for all you've done," she told him. "He wants to make you general manager of T&W beginning right now."

A frugal smile eased Tulane's face. "Tell your father I deeply appreciate the offer, Laurie. But I'm leaving for Junction. I've got important business there."

"Fenton?" she asked, and her face showed a sudden gravity.

When he nodded, Laurie grasped his arm, said urgently: "Don't do it Lane! Don't soil your hands with that man's blood!"

"They're already soiled with Max Harlequin's blood," he reminded her.

"But that was in self-defense, Lane. If you deliberately go gunning for Fenton and kill him, it will be murder."

Tulane thought: *What difference does anything make, now?*

"Don't do it, for my sake," she pleaded. "For both our sakes."

Her eyes held a plain appeal. And her lips, so sweetly smiling now, promised all the reward a man would ever want.

In this long moment of indecision, Lane Tulane tried to ignore the debt of gratitude he owed Clark Medwick. He was strongly tempted to take her into his arms—to taste again the wild, sweet flavor of her lips. But between him and that temptation was the sure knowledge that he wouldn't be standing here now if Medwick hadn't saved his life. Laurie's lips weren't for him. A man couldn't steal from the man who'd kept him from becoming a bullet-riddled corpse.

Tulane said flatly: "I'm going to Junction, regardless. But first I need another drink—several drinks." And for the second time this night, Lane Tulane strode hurriedly to the Cross-Tie Saloon, cursing softly to himself, like a man prodded unbearably by the devils of discontent.

Some time after midnight Tulane staggered down the Main Street to Pat Grogan's livery stable. He roused the old Irishman who slept in the saddle room and asked: "You got one of Breen Santana's bug-branded broncs in here—a rat-tailed sorrel with a blazed face?"

"I have," Grogan admitted sourly, "and I was told ye would be after him. But not at this time o' night, bejabbers!"

"Well I am," Tulane declared, and leaned drunkenly against an empty stall. "I'm riding to Junction right now."

Grogan turned back into the saddle room for the sorrel's gear, but when he came out again, Tulane was stretched full length in the stall, sleeping soundly.

Whereupon Pat Grogan muttered, "Damn a drunk to hell," and went back to bed.

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A CHILL breeze stirred dust wreaths in Junction's main thoroughfare as Lane Tulane rode into town. The Acme Saloon's lamplit windows were like beacons, reminding him that he needed "some hair of the dog." He had been sick when he awoke in Grogan's Livery shortly before noon and during the long ride from Fandango had cursed himself roundly for getting drunk.

Deciding against taking a drink until he'd had his show-down with Fenton, Tulane left his horse at the saloon hitchrack and walked toward the hotel. If Fenton was still in town he'd probably be at the Palace, sparking Rose. Piano and fiddle music drifted down from the open windows of the Odd Fellows Hall farther along the street; Tulane glanced up at couples dancing past windows and remembered that this was Saturday night.

Then, as he neared the hotel, he noticed a saddle horse standing at the rack. The bronc was directly in a shaft of light from the lobby doorway, its big Bar H brand plainly visible. Instantly, then, Tulane became wary. Ike Roselle, he guessed, was on the drift. And the Bar H ramrod might be wanting to finish the fight he'd run away from last night....

Acting on impulse, Tulane crossed the Main Street and turned into an alley that ran back between the Wells Fargo building and Mandel's Mercantile. If Ike Roselle was in town he wanted to know it before challenging Fenton. Tulane was halfway down the alley when he heard a stage coach rumble into town and presently heard Peg-Leg Pierce's voice calling to the Wells Fargo agent.

Coming to the trash-littered lane which ran behind the buildings here, he walked to the Acme Saloon and stopped at a cobwebbed rear window. He peered in at the bar and grinned reflectively. Roselle stood there, glass in hand.

Tulane retraced his steps to Main Street, stopped by the stage office, and asked the agent: "Did Peg-Leg bring my saddle?"

"He did," the agent said.

Tulane paid the bill, said, "I'll be taking my stuff on the stage tomorrow," and going outside, gave the street a questioning appraisal.

The dining room windows at the hotel were dark. That meant Rose had finished her work. It might also mean that Alec Fenton would be escorting her to the dance any moment now....

Tulane shaped up a cigarette and smoked it, standing well back in the shadows here. A girl pulled down the shade of an upstairs windows at the hotel, her head and shoulders showing briefly. Something about her reminded Tulane of Laurie; made him recall

how she'd smiled at him just before he'd kissed her that first night. The bleak realization that he'd never see that smile again filled him with a terrible longing. He was right back where he'd started; there had been no Laurie in his life when he stood here two days ago, waiting for a southbound stage. Just a drifter's discontent, and a nagging need for vengeance. And it was the same now.

Abruptly Tulane tossed his cigarette into the street. He forced himself to think of the shame his folks had suffered because their only son had been drummed out of the Sixth Texas Cavalry in disgrace. He deliberately fanned the embers of his hate, wanting that flame to make him forget Laurie's words about "murder." It hadn't occurred to her that Fenton might out-shoot him. And it hadn't occurred to him until this moment. He was thinking about that when he saw Alec Fenton come out of the hotel with Rose.

Instantly, Tulane tensed. First he had to warn Rose away, so there would be no risk to her. He was on the point of calling out, when a man stepped swiftly from an alley across the street—a man Tulane recognized at once as Ike Roselle!

CAUGHT off balance by this unexpected complication, Tulane stood gripped by indecision. Fenton was to his left, Roselle to his right, which meant he was trapped between them—even though both of them were across the street.

The thought crossed Tulane's mind that he had been neatly outmaneuvered by these two. But at least, if he succeeded in killing Fenton now, Laurie couldn't call it murder....

At this exact instant he heard Roselle call sharply: "Go back, Rose—go back!"

Tulane saw Rose jerk free of Fenton's arm; saw her back hastily away. Then he heard Fenton blurt out: "You can have her, Ike! You can take her to the dance!"

That didn't make sense to Tulane. Nor did Roselle's cold-voiced command when he said, "Grab your gun, Fenton!"

"I'll—I'll take the next stage out, Roselle," Fenton yelled in a panicked voice, "Don't—don't shoot!"

"You had your chance—now grab iron!" Roselle snapped, and deliberately raised his right hand to cuff back the brim of his hat.

At that movement, Alec Fenton made his frantic, frenzied draw. But his gun was scarcely clear of leather before Roselle fired, slamming three shots at Fenton in rapid succession.

It wasn't a nice thing to watch. Fenton jerked back, his gun dropping to the sidewalk. He took three teetering steps sideways

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before he collapsed, blood oozing in a bubbling froth from his punctured lungs.

Again, as last night in Fandango, people came rushing into the street. But now Tulane was merely a spectator whom no one noticed. He watched Roselle cross quickly to his bronc, step into saddle and ride close to the hotel veranda where Rose stood in stunned silence.

"You're my girl," Ike told her flatly. "I told you not to forget that."

Afterward as Tulane turned toward the saloon, it occurred to him that Roselle had cheated him out of his vengeance. He thought: *I should resent that.* But he didn't. It was a strange thing. He didn't feel anything at all. For the first time in five years, he had no hate whatever to sustain him. It was like being empty.

He was wondering about that when a voice called his name, a voice that sounded like Laurie's. The astonishment of it stopped Tulane in midstride; it pulled him around so that he was facing Laurie when she rushed up to him.

"Lane," she cried. "Oh Lane!"

Then she was in his arms, smiling at him through her tears. "I'm so glad you didn't have to kill Fenton!" she sobbed. "Oh, Lane, you don't know how happy I am!"

"What are you doing in Junction?" Tulane remanded roughly.

"I came on the stage," she told him, blushing like a school girl. "I—was waiting at the hotel until you finished your business here."

The abrupt realization that this girl had followed him him from Fandango—that she would have been waiting for him even though he'd killed Fenton—was almost beyond Tulane's comprehension. It filled him with a profound, sure belief that she belonged to him; crowded all sense of emptiness and futility from him.

He asked huskily: "What about Medwick?"

"I told him how it was with us," she told him. "Clark understands."

Then she snuggled closer in his arms. "Dad still needs a general manager Lane," she whispered. "And—and I need a kiss, darling."

It was what Lane Tulane needed, too. They both got what they needed.

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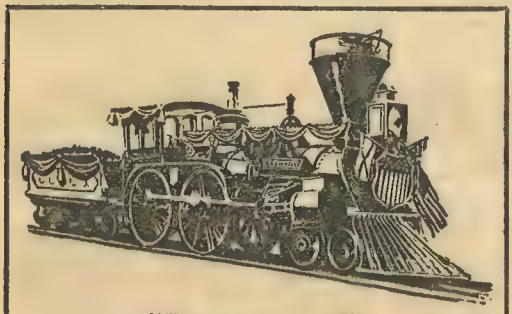

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LIGHTNIN' STRIKES TWICE!

(Continued from page 67)

THE minute he said it I recognized the impersonal stare of a blind man. I'd seen it before. I figgered that must have been what had looked so familiar because I sure wasn't on that bank job with Lightnin'. He'd only been ridin' for me for a few months—about six, all told.

Lightnin' didn't take his eyes off the fellow. He shifted his shoulders from side to side as though he was tryin' to see if the man's eyes followed the movements.

"You're doin' a little guessin', ain't you, John?" Lightnin' moved in a semi-circle away from us, still watching the fellow by the wall.

"Nope," John said quietly. "He hasn't been able to see light since you gun-whipped him five years ago. It'll take a thousand dollars to send him east for an operation."

I could see Lightnin' give a start. The fingers on his right hand started to chase each other.

"How do you know so damned much about it?" he demanded.

"He's my brother," John said, softly.

Lightnin' uncoiled like a strikin' rattler. His long body twisted sidewise, his right hand swished past holster an' come up filled. It looked as though he just unwound an' threw fire an' lead out've the end of his sixgun.

I never did see how John got out of the way, but somehow he shifted aside an' put a slug smack dab through Lightnin's head just like he was firin' offhand at a tin can.

I took one look at the business end of John's six-shooter an' said, "Looks like you got that thousand dollars John, an' mebbe you'll get another thousand for me, huh?"

"We'll talk about that later," John replied. "You high-tail it out of here an' get the sheriff."

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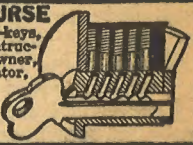

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